

THE FORMATION OF POLICY FOR THE
CONTROL OF VERMIN AND NOXIOUS
WEEDS IN NEW SOUTH WALES
AND VICTORIA 1880-1930

Kamoya Peterson

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This thesis is my own work.

Kamoya Peterson.

Kamoya Peterson.

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ABSTRACT

Between 1880 and the depression of the 1930s the governments of Victoria and New South Wales framed a great deal of legislation intended to deal with the growing rabbit menace, the spread of noxious weeds and the problems attributed to some native animals. The environmental perceptions and attitudes of the landholders in both states had been shaped by a common heritage, similar experiences and the same ambitions. Initially both governments shared an almost identical approach: the two main branches of pest control were handled separately and it was intended that both would remain the responsibility of landholders and would be administered on a local, decentralized basis. However, during the 1880s Victoria began a slow movement towards the formation of a centralized, integrated policy, whereas New South Wales, despite a brief experiment with centrally directed rabbit extermination in 1883, has retained a divided, locally administered vermin and weed control policy. The main reasons for the differences in development lie in the effects of broader land policy decisions and the nature of the available administrative structures.

ABBREVIATIONS

A.A.	Australian Archives
<u>ADB</u>	<u>Australian Dictionary of Biography</u>
ANUA	Australian National University Archives of Business and Labour
<u>CPD</u>	<u>Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates</u>
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization
CSIROA	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization Archives
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research
MUA	Melbourne University Archives
ML	Mitchell Library
NSWA	New South Wales State Archives
<u>NSWJLC</u>	<u>New South Wales Journal of the Legislative Council</u>
<u>NSWPD</u>	<u>New South Wales Parliamentary Debates</u>
<u>NSWPP</u>	<u>New South Wales Parliamentary Papers</u>
<u>NSWV&P</u>	<u>New South Wales Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly</u>
<u>PR</u>	<u>Australasian Pastoralists' Review (1891-1901), Pastoralists' Review (1901-1913), Pastoral Review (1914 onwards)</u>
<u>VPD</u>	<u>Victorian Parliamentary Debates</u>
<u>VPP</u>	<u>Victorian Parliamentary Papers</u>
<u>VV&P</u>	<u>Victorian Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly</u>

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In law words change their meaning far more slowly than they do in popular usage, because the law is built on precedents. As a result legal terms sometimes provide information on the attitudes underlying the original statutes. In nineteenth century England vermin was still loosely considered to consist of those animals which preyed upon preserved game. The Gun Licence Act of 1870 and the Ground Game Act of 1880 made it clear that, although rabbits were known to damage crops and pasture, they were not to be classed as vermin, nor were any birds. Foxes were technically vermin, but often they were informally protected, despite their forays into the coverts, and the 1919 Forestry Act placed squirrels in the vermin category.¹ Both these apparent exceptions retained a tenuous connection with the traditional definition: in many areas foxes were as highly valued as game for the sport that they provided, and squirrels damaged trees, which were a sporting as well as an economic asset. In other words, until well into the twentieth century the English definition remained based on a social assumption about the privileges and life-style of a particular class. The term 'vermin' in

1 Earl Jowitt, Dictionary of English Law, 1930; Stroud's Judicial Dictionary, 1974.

English land law was not primarily related to economic considerations.

An Australian definition of vermin developed slowly during the early years of settlement. Obviously the English definition was inappropriate to a new society. Nevertheless it influenced the way newcomers regarded some animals. Legal tradition had not fostered the habit of assessing animals from a purely economic point of view. The dingo, with his scalp tightening wail and predatory look, was quickly recognized as a menace to livestock, and became one of the first targets for vermin laws. It therefore seems contradictory that, at the same time, a smaller animal but one with similar tastes, was deliberately introduced and protected. However, the fox was assessed under different criteria. Similarly, the rabbit, one of the widely acknowledged banes of nineteenth century English farming, was encouraged in Australia, as much for sporting reasons as for food. Those who aspired to recreate English social structures in Australia looked on these animals as targets for gentleman shooters. This was not measured against the known economic damage that they could do. The two ways of looking at such animals coexisted in the minds of many landholders in England and Australia, without producing any apparent awareness of their basic incompatibility.

Possibly the last echoes of this divided approach can be seen in the way the emu in late nineteenth century New South Wales moved uneasily back and forth between the

vermin lists of the pastures and stock protection boards and the protected schedule of the 1893 Native Birds Protection Act, which was basically a game law, intended to secure adequate closed seasons for sportsmen.

Another lingering remnant of the original English concept of vermin is the usual restriction of the term to animals and a few hunting birds. Only the Public Health Acts treat insects as vermin. In 1956 a South Australian judge explained that 'vermin implies something in the nature of an infestation or infection of the land - a pest that will breed and injure the land'² but this was not taken to include pests like locusts. Although some non-hunting birds were at times included under Australian vermin laws before 1930, with the exception of the large, flightless emu, which thus behaves more like an animal than a bird, they have been included as after-thoughts. They have not influenced the formulation of policy and therefore will not be considered in this thesis. For the same reason I have not discussed domestic stock that ran wild and was included in some vermin lists. A full catalogue of the vermin statutes would be long and dull; attention will be given to the animals which prompted major decisions which touched on other aspects of government policy and required thoughtful assessment.

By the 1890s all the colonial governments had drawn up vermin statutes that were based on economic criteria,

2 Sellars v Gill (1956), South Australian State Reports I.

but this did not lead to straightforward decisions about which creatures ought to be proclaimed. Clashes of interest emerged that could not be settled by simple accounting procedures. The early settlers had created conflicts of interest when some persisted in seeing a few animals in terms of their social utility rather than their economic impact. New conflicts arose when animals that harmed many landholders proved to be of economic worth to others, or when the costs of eradication were believed to be as crippling as the damage actually done by the vermin. A third source of dissension emerged when some people again moved away from the strictly economic assessment of an animal's value, not because they assigned it a role in their social aspirations, but because they believed that the animal had intrinsic worth as a unique creature. At this point the vermin debate merges into the conservation issue, so it will not be followed very far.

If there were perplexing conceptual problems in laying an acceptable basis for vermin laws, there were many more hazards obstructing the creation of a noxious weed control policy. 'Weed' is only a loose description of a plant that grows where it is unwanted. A 'noxious weed' is a plant that is perceived to have certain undesirable characteristics and takes the place of more desirable species.³ This need not mean that it is poisonous. Noxious weeds may contaminate wool or grain with their seeds, or taint the milk

3 W.T. Parsons, Noxious Weeds of Victoria, Melbourne, 1973, p. 3.

of dairy herds. They may simply be inedible to certain stock. Once again the assessment criteria are economic, but the possibilities of conflicts of interest are enormous. A plant which adversely affects a jersey cow may be a nourishing staple for a sheep. Saffron thistle seeds discolour flour but some graziers believe that the thistle is good drought feed. The extent to which individual landholders should be compelled to take expensive action in order to prevent harm to distant neighbours is a contentious point. Well maintained fences provide protection against most vermin but are no defence against wind, water and bird carried seeds.

It appears that there should be strong links between vermin and weed legislation. They affect the same groups; they involve similar conflicts of interest and expensive counter-measures; they imply a similar need for external supervision and coercion. There is also a biological connection. Uncontrolled weed growth provides impenetrable, undisturbed harbour for vermin: to a lesser extent the uncontrolled movement of vermin, like the movement of stock, can spread weeds. However, attempts to control the two problems developed separately and it was a long time before circumstances began to draw them close. In Victoria the two branches of pest control were eventually combined. The reasons why this did not occur in New South Wales require explanation.

Most Australian history books have paid little

attention to the impact of vermin and weeds on the economic and political development of the nation, although by the early twentieth century the scale of both problems was unique in contemporary world history. Innumerable wild guesses have been made as to how much the rabbit plagues cost Australia. As early as 1883 Victoria estimated it had lost about £5,000,000 in revenue.⁴ By the 1920s New South Wales estimates of its loss ranged from £10,000,000 to £20,000,000 p.a.⁵ These figures were based on the drop in stock numbers in infested districts and are unreliable and incomplete. The western division had been devastated by the 1895-1902 drought and the earlier years of overstocking. Rabbits had played a big part in destroying the saltbush and scrub trees that previously held the friable soil together, but they had not been the only factor. On the other hand, estimates based solely on stock figures took no account of the huge cost of erosion and silting due to rabbits, or the crop losses. Nor did they allow for the loss of productivity due to the massive amount of time, labour and capital invested in vermin fencing and other expensive control measures.

After myxomatosis took hold in 1950 and reduced the rabbit population by about 90 per cent for a few years, CSIRO calculated the simple increase in the value of the

4 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 292.

5 CPD, 1924, 108, 292; 303.

Australian wool clip alone at about £100,000,000 p.a.⁶ By 1950 Australia had been struggling to deal with rabbits for over 70 years. The cost must have been literally incalculable. To this unimaginable figure should be added a guess at the loss caused by just one noxious weed, prickly pear. By the 1920s prickly pear had taken over at least 25 million acres of Queensland and New South Wales, rendering it almost totally useless.⁷ The general lack of lasting impression caused by these phenomena is one of the themes that will be investigated.

Although there has been little specific historical writing on the vermin and weed problem, a great deal of work has been done in recent years by historical geographers and some regional historians on the broad factors that influenced the way settlers perceived their environment.⁸ R.L. Heathcote has summarized the three major components behind this process as the actual area being examined, the kinds of people and organizations doing the observing and the way in which information was conveyed to them.⁹ He has

6 CSIROA, Myxomatosis files, 1952, Fenner and Douglas, E. Rolls, They All Ran Wild - The Story of Pests on the Land in Australia, Sydney, 1969, p. 184.

7 CSIROA, Correspondence File 81, Noxious Weeds, Prickly Pear 1920.

8 G. Bolton, 'The Historian as Artist and Interpreter of the Environment', in G. Seddon & M. Davis, Man and Landscape in Australia - Towards an Ecological Vision, Canberra, 1976, pp. 113-124. A very useful summary article.

9 R.L. Heathcote, "Early European Perceptions of the Australian Environment", *Ibid.*, p. 29-40. Also expanded in Australia, London, 1975, pp. 204-217 & A. Rapoport (ed.) Australia as Human Setting - Approaches to the Designed Environment, Sydney, 1972, pp. 76-84.

described how the country posed difficulties for those trying to form impressions of its potential because of the distances encompassed and the difficulties of transport. The seasonal patterns were as unfamiliar as the flora and fauna. Those who came to the new land also brought with them a range of preconceptions based on their earlier experiences and education and they naturally tended to look at their surroundings from the perspective of their own hopes and fears. The wealthy man searching for ample cattle pastures assessed the situation very differently from the scientist, the forced emigrant or the would-be small farmer, but in their varying efforts to create the kind of life that they wanted, all settlers caused changes in the environment. They were not willing to live like the aboriginal inhabitants, and even aboriginals had produced considerable changes through their hunting techniques and use of fire.

The way Heathcote's three features inter-reacted to help create what became the vermin and weed menace can be illustrated by the story of Dr Cox' visit to Mudgee, west of the dividing range and inland from Newcastle, in 1865. He went to see some successfully acclimatized peacocks on his cousin's property. He found hundreds of the birds in a large paddock covered with introduced thistles, which he praised as good drought feed. He went on to observe with pleasure:

On the other side of the river was a rabbit warren in which there were rabbits in thousands. In addition the pigs had run wild in the same property and so increased as to fairly become a nuisance. They had been shot down in regular battues.¹⁰

Cox was scientifically trained and a member of the Acclimatization Society, therefore he was eager to spread what he believed were useful, interesting or beautiful plants and animals over the continent. Most cattlemen would not have spent time and money on peacocks. Experienced grain farmers would not have praised the thistles. A former English tenant farmer would have been very worried about the thousands of rabbits. Yet as an amateur naturalist Cox saw things differently, and as a colonial gentleman the passing reference to the nuisance of wild pigs was of small consequence compared with the pleasure given by the possibility of indulging in the esteemed English social activity of mass animal slaughter, the battue.

One of the most fruitful areas of study opened up by the attention paid to the creation of environmental perceptions had been a re-examination of the relationship between the way administrators approached the process of

10 Acclimatization Society of New South Wales, Annual Report, 1865 ML.

land settlement and what the settlers themselves decided.¹¹ J.M. Powell has drawn up a useful schematic model of the way the process worked in Victoria. The officials made their assessment of the economic and physical environment which was passed through the filter of individual bureaucratic reactions and current policy theories to the legislature. Popular appraisal began with the individual landholders and was developed by individuals and groups and reviewed by the actual process of working the land.¹² The same general pattern can be applied to vermin and weed policy formation, and although vermin and weed control might seem to be a problem in practical biology rather than a subject for theoretical and ideological formulation, both officials and settlers saw the matter through the 'distorting lens'¹³ of their commitment to certain concepts of government responsibility and theories on how land should be utilized.

There are many theories on the way policy initiatives develop but recent writers on nineteenth century

11 R.L. Heathcote, Back of Bourke, A Study of Land Appraisal and Settlement in Semi-Arid Australia, Melbourne 1965. D.N. Jeans, 'The impress of central authority upon the Landscape: south-eastern Australia 1788-1850', in J.M. Powell and M. Williams, Australian Space, Australian Time, Melbourne, 1975, pp. 1-15. J.M. Powell, The Public Lands of Australia Felix: Settlement and Land Appraisal in Victoria 1834-91, with Special Reference to the Western Plains, Melbourne, 1970.

12 Ibid., p. XXI

13 Heathcote, 'Early European Perceptions of the Australian Landscape', p. 32.

administrative history have tended to fall into two camps: those who see the spread of ideas, such as those of Bentham or the economic theorists, as the main motivation behind new, official responses, and those who emphasise the role of 'pragmatic, tidy-minded men, pressing towards solutions inherent in social problems as they arose'.¹⁴ Because of the effect on land utilization and tenure agreements, and also because of the expense of counter-measures, vermin and weed legislation involved many social problems. Of course it is easy to over-emphasize the dichotomy between the two types of explanation. Those framing legislation have to begin from some conceptual basis. Slum clearance legislation cannot be expected from those who do not think in terms of a reasonable standard of housing; landmark preservation acts cannot be drawn up until officials have begun to see their environment in terms of its historical significance, and vermin and weed legislation implies a whole network of concepts relating to the rights and duties of landholding, which were among the most discussed ideas in nineteenth century English law. The reverse side of this

14 G. Sutherland (ed.), Studies in the Growth of Nineteenth Century Government, London, 1972, p. 3.

This quotation is her summary of the general position adopted by O.M. MacDonagh, A Pattern of Government Growth 1800-1860: The Passenger Acts and Their Enforcement, London, 1961.

It is an oversimplification but illustrates the main point of division.

basic proposition can also be illustrated by the way vermin and weed legislation developed, in this case by drawing attention to a feature that is noticeably lacking, namely anxiety about one of the main control methods advocated, poisoning.

In these days of considerable public interest in substances that pollute the environment and endanger life and health Australian law may still be classed as lax, but in the nineteenth century the kind of awareness necessary to promote the formation of laws on the subject rarely existed. Just because there were statutes concerning food adulteration and some noxious trades does not mean that the same health concepts were applied to a wider range of activities. The way categories of legislation change and merge is in itself an indication of the way perceptions and attitudes change. In later chapters it will be pointed out that there were men in the 1890s who argued against the widespread use of poison because of the harm done to birds. Although such changes in environmental attitudes were slight, it is worth remembering that they pre-date the growth of similar anxiety about the hazards to human life.

Part of the popular image of the North American frontier is of a society that was remarkably free with its guns. Australia was just as free with its poisons, but they have not left an equivalent mark on the Australian legend, despite the known impact of their use against native animals and sometimes against aboriginals. The role of

poison in the as yet only partly explored social history of early Australia can only be speculated upon. Because people did not think of poisons in the way we are learning to do today the law and official policy provides no information. Coroners were often not medical men and autopsies were rare in the bush.¹⁵ Station owners regularly bought arsenic, strychnine and phosphorus by the pound and cyanide by the ounce. Although Mrs Beaton never penned the immortal 'first catch your hare' recipe, the New South Wales Agricultural Gazette often included rabbit eradication articles that sounded like a perverted Mrs Beaton: Mix 30 pounds of green chaff with 3 pounds of sugar, one gallon of water and shake in one pound of arsenic 'pepperbox fashion'; take two pounds of arsenic (powdered), 10 pounds of pollard, 2 pounds of bran, 2 pints of treacle or honey and mix, then drop small handfuls into water until a thick dough forms and knead it well.¹⁶ Rabbits love jam but the department warned that, because they are 'fussy feeders', only good, unburnt jam should be used. One ounce of strychnine to 25 pounds of good jam was considered a reliable mixture.¹⁷ Even the least imaginative man must have seen the possibilities of ridding himself of a nagging wife or aggravating partner. Most recipes ended with the instruction

15 P. Hasluck, Mucking About, Melbourne, 1977, pp. 100, 116-17. Even in the 1920s rural inquests were often perfunctory.

16 New South Wales Agricultural Gazette, 1902 (2), p. 757.

17 Ibid., p. 758-9.

to 'knead well', but no advice to wash the hands afterwards. Arsenic in small doses is notoriously wrongly diagnosed as stomach trouble, and both arsenic and phosphorus, the other common rabbit killer, are accumulative poisons. Whereas the Agricultural Gazette frequently warned about the fire risk involved in handling insufficiently dissolved and mixed phosphorus, only occasional mention was made of the dangers of phosphorus fumes, and then with the rider that 'a little of it will not hurt'.¹⁸

Debates in New South Wales in the early twentieth century over restricting the sale of poisons in rural areas to authorized chemists were the result of pharmacy board pressure to protect a lucrative side of chemists' business, and some anxiety over a suspected increase in deliberate abortions. The authorities were aware of the dangers of the substances used but apparently had faith in the good sense, hygiene and probity of the users. Nowadays this may be doubted and modern vermin and weed control policies are being influenced by concepts that did not affect the thinking of nineteenth century administrators and therefore could not be reflected in their legislation.

However, although legislation cannot emerge from a conceptual vacuum, neither can it emerge from a legal vacuum, because law is accumulative. Once an act is proclaimed it influences future acts in related fields. It

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 756.

need not pre-determine the course that will be followed, but it sets a direction. Deviations can be made but only if the original step is revived. This becomes very important in terms of the practical features of policy implementation, particularly the nature of the available administrative structure and the sources of finance. It is at this point that the pragmatic rather than the ideological approach to policy formulation becomes important. New South Wales and Victoria provide excellent case material on the two strands of the argument. They were neighbours and encountered similar problems at approximately the same time. Their settlers were drawn from the same background and there was free and frequent movement between the colonies. They also shared a common legal and political heritage. However, Victoria eventually opted for a centralized, integrated system of vermin and weed control while New South Wales continued to follow a decentralized and divided approach. This is the main point of the thesis.

As the writers on land policy appraisal have pointed out, official policy cannot be divorced from the effect of individual practices. The two continually work to modify each other but, because of the large area and the long time span covered, this thesis will take its direction from the official side of policy formation. Commonwealth legislation has also been included, but only in so far as it relates to the two states. It reveals some

of the effects of constitutional factors on the development and expression of attitudes and it had direct effects on state policies.

Because of the extensive publications issued by CSIRO there is a great deal of literature available on the technical and biological features of vermin and weed control. Very little of it is referred to in later chapters. It has been excellently used by Eric Rolls in his account of the way in which various pests were introduced and the kind of methods that were employed against them.¹⁹ They All Ran Wild is a carefully researched, beautifully written book and I have tried to avoid overlapping the ground it so ably covers. I have been primarily interested in investigating the way changing attitudes and perceptions relate to policy formation and the factors that influence the actual passage of legislation.

19 E. Rolls, They All Ran Wild - The Story of Pests on the Land in Australia, Sydney, 1969.

CHAPTER 2

Making a Rabbit Control Policy - Victoria
to 1890

In 1861 a gentleman wrote to the Yeoman and Australian Acclimatiser about a pleasant afternoon he had spent shooting rabbits. In one hour he had killed seven pairs:

I mention the above to show what can be done in this country in providing sport: our friend established his warren (not six miles from Melbourne) only three or four years ago, and now the rabbits are all over the place and positively require thinning ... I have no doubt that there are many places in the colony which might be turned to advantage in this way.¹

There are many places and the idea was popular. Although the name of Thomas Austin of Barwon Park, Geelong, has become firmly linked with the introduction of rabbits to Australia, he was a late-comer to the project. Governor Phillip included five domestic rabbits in his 1788 list of livestock brought out by the First Fleet. Had they proved more hardy the pastoral history of Australia might have been very different. Over the next eighty years numerous warrens were established in the colonies and on off-shore islands as emergency food for sailors. Another correspondent to the Acclimatiser described how he trained dogs to protect the warren he began at Mt. Alexander, Victoria, in

¹ Yeoman and Australian Acclimatiser, 14 December 1861, p. 13. The paper was published by the Argus office 1861-1864.

1845. He successfully countered the dingoes and was delighted that 'in two years from the time when they were first turned out, the whole neighbourhood was stocked with rabbits'.² Then a new manager took over and killed them all. Austin did not bring in his 24 wild rabbits until 1859.³

After such a long, slow introduction it is not surprising that the first reports in the late 1860s of enormous damage being done in the western district by rabbits raised little alarm. When Francis Longmore, the vehement anti-squatter and an Assembly member for the western district, opposed the annual budget grant to the Acclimatization Society in 1866 on the grounds that rabbits had become 'a perfect curse to the agriculturalists',⁴ his charge was immediately disputed. Another member pointed out that rabbits had not been brought in by the society but by Austin:

and surely if that gentleman chose to let rabbits run free on his private property he had a perfect right to do so ... He only wished that other large proprietors would do their duty in this direction.⁵

The Australian Acclimatization Societies, which were part

2 Ibid., 21 December 1861, p. 38.

3 The most interesting account of the introduction of the rabbit is given in Rolls, They All Ran Wild. Chapter 1.

4 VPD, 1866, 2, 367.

5 Ibid., 368.

of a world-wide movement, were at the height of their popularity in the early 1860s. Membership included trained scientists and enthusiastic amateurs. The Victorian government initially made generous annual grants of between £2,000 and £3,000 to the local branch but by 1868 the amount had been reduced to £500 and after that funds were directed to the Bureau of Agriculture instead.⁶ From the 1870s the societies increasingly concentrated on the formation of zoological gardens rather than establishing new species. However, the original aims of the movement were well summarized by Dr George Bennett in an address in 1863: 'stocking our waste waters, woods and plains with choice animals, making that which was dull and lifeless become animated by creatures in the full enjoyment of existence, and lands before useless, become fertile with rare and valuable trees and plants'.⁷

It is easy to be scornful of the narrow view taken of the unfamiliar Australian environment, but newcomers to the Australian landscape were dissatisfied not just because they saw it with eyes and expectations conditioned by the European scene; Australia lacked draught, milk and wool producing animals and had no prolific edible grain or fibre plants. European settlement had to be based on the introduction of animals and plants for food, clothing and

6 Ibid., 1868, 6, 755.

7 Annual Reports of the Acclimatization Society of New South Wales, 1863, p. 13, ML 590.6A.

transport. A few acclimatizers had become aware that this could create problems. Naturally they sought solutions in terms of their experience of the European environment, so they urged more introductions. As Dr Madden explained to a meeting of the Acclimatization Society in Victoria in 1864, closer settlement and foxes had driven away native birds and had led to an increase in harmful insects: there was a need to restore the balance of nature.⁸

The balance of nature, a concept described by Madden as 'a favoured and most interesting study', was a deeply held part of popular nineteenth century belief.⁹ There was also growing interest in Charles Darwin's idea of natural selection.¹⁰ In many instances his work found private acceptance while it was still being publically condemned, but Madden was prepared to be bolder. Speaking five years after the Origin of Species was published he declared that 'although perhaps very few will adopt his [Darwin's] peculiar views in their entirety, we must all feel deeply indebted to him for much that he has written'.¹¹ Scientifically the idea of the balance of nature was incompatible with evolutionary theory, but in practice, the

8 Yeoman and Australian Acclimatizer, 27 August 1864, p. 762.

9 J.C. le Souef, 'Acclimatization in Victoria', Victorian Historical Magazine, 1965, Vol. 36, pp. 8-29.

10 Argus, 25 November 1862 (early history of the Acclimatization Society); A. Mozley, 'Evolution and The Climate of Opinion in Australia 1840-1876', Victorian Studies, 1966, Vol. 10, pp. 411-430; C.D. Goodwin, 'Evolution in Australian Social Thought', Journal of the History of Ideas, 1964, Vol. 25, pp. 393-416.

11 Yeoman and Australian Acclimatizer, 27 August 1864, p.762.

theoretically static notion of a balance led the less philosophically inclined to see their environment in terms of a changing adjustment of forces that could be manipulated at will to their own advantage. This soon merged with a crude concept of survival of the fittest that justified the destruction of some species to the benefit of others. From the 1880s onward both ideas became firmly linked to an unquenchable rural optimism about the ability of scientists to find simple solutions to all vermin and weed problems if only they were not deliberately thwarted.¹²

Like the first settlers later nineteenth century landholders saw a land waiting to be made productive. They did not distinguish between encouraging the spread of cattle, sheep, horses and pigs and attempting to breed rabbits. When the rabbits started to become a pest it took a long while for people to grasp that they were not easy to control. After all, in England they were still protected under the game laws. English farmers complained about the damage done by rabbits but managed to live with it, even though on most farms only the landlord and those he specifically authorised were allowed to kill rabbits.¹³ In 1869 a western district farmer from Colac, Joseph Connor, proposed an amendment in parliament to the Local Government Act to

12 See Chapter 6.

13 Rabbits were not strictly speaking 'game', but they were specifically named in most English Game Acts. Although the 1831 Game Law 1 & 2 Wm. IV, c. 32 vested ownership of game in the occupier of the land, nearly all tenancy agreements continued to reserve all game rights to the landlord until the 1880 Ground Game Act gave tenants an inalienable right to kill hares and rabbits.

make the destruction of rabbits compulsory, because the 'rabbit nuisance promised to be as great as that of the locusts in the land of Egypt'.¹⁴ James Casey, the Minister for Justice, who became Lands Minister in 1872, agreed that rabbits were causing consternation but added that 'owners and occupiers could kill them now if they so desired'. It was nearly another ten years before a serious parliamentary debate on the subject took place, and there was no legislation until the end of 1880. Yet Tasmania passed a rabbit destruction act in 1871 and South Australia in 1875.

The late 1870s was not a propitious time for introducing a rabbit bill in Victoria. There was a serious drought from 1876 to 1879. Some graziers saw a connection between the decline in carrying capacity in the Mallee and Wimmera and the destruction of hardy scrub feed by rabbits, but drought is also a rabbit killer and drought-affected landholders are rarely eager to take on new financial burdens. Pastoral licences granted under the 1862 Duffy Act were due to expire in 1880 and there was great uncertainty about future policy and reluctance to invest. The Lands Department itself was in a state of turmoil following the 'Black Wednesday' dismissals of 9 January 1878, when the

14 VPD, 1869, 7, 311.

Unless otherwise stated all minor biographical detail on politicians is taken by the following sources: K. Thomson & G. Serle, A Biographical Register of the Victorian Parliament 1859-1900, Canberra 1972; A.W. Martin & P. Wardle, Members of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales 1856-1901, ANU, 1959; J. Rydon, A Biographical Register of the Commonwealth Parliament 1901-1972, Canberra, 1975.

refusal of the Legislative Council to pass the appropriations bill became an excuse to sack the 'curled darlings', the sons of civic officials, businessmen, squatters and heads of ministries, who had held so many positions, and replace them with officials appointed by the Lands Department.¹⁵ However, in October 1878 Francis Longmore, Commissioner for Crown Lands and Survey, introduced a Rabbit Nuisance bill.¹⁶

According to the bill's opponents it was primarily a measure designed to attack squatters. As even the man appointed to introduce the legislation in the Council, Henry Cuthbert, said: 'Perhaps it will be thought that the bill as passed by the Assembly presses too harshly upon the pastoral tenants of the Crown, inasmuch as their licences have only two years to run ... It seems to me there is some justification for such an argument'.¹⁷ Others put the matter more bluntly: 'In the eyes of the government the

15 D.R. Mossman, 'The Victorian Lands Department in the Seventies', Victorian Historical Magazine, 1936, Vol. 16, p. 67.

16 The Board of Crown Lands and Survey was combined with the Board of Public Works in 1851 and called the Board of Lands and Works. The two were separated the following year but the Board of Lands and Works remained the statutory authority in all land matters until 1964. It had no staff and all land functions were carried out by the Board of Crown Lands and Survey under the Commissioner for Crown Lands, commonly known as the Minister for Lands. The Board (or Lands Department) had two permanent heads: the Surveyor General and the Assistant Commissioner. In 1872 a branch Department of Agriculture was established which became independent in 1890. See Victorian Year Book, 1968, p. 100; 1971, p. 105.

17 VPD, 1878, 29, 1677.

rabbits are by no means a nuisance, but a wonderful blessing. Certainly they will afford a means of extirpating altogether a large number of pastoral tenants and worrying and harrassing freeholders'.¹⁸ There were grounds for these suspicions. The year before the Council had been forced to accept a Land Tax Act and Longmore's hostility to the squatting interest was notorious. However, closer examination does not support a vindictive interpretation.

Longmore's concern about rabbits was of some years standing, as seen by his speech in 1866, and the government received a number of petitions calling for action.¹⁹ There was little point in continuing to fight for more free selection legislation if settlers were soon to be eaten off the land. The minister had recently toured the Wimmera in connection with the 1878 Lands Commission and so had first-hand knowledge of the damage being done.²⁰ There was also ample evidence from Tasmania, South Australia and New Zealand that it was unlikely to be an isolated or short-term problem.²¹ Had Longmore been mainly interested in attacking the squatters he would have accepted Duncan Gillies' amendment and raised the proposed vermin levy from a maximum of 2d per acre to 1s. Instead, during the debate he reduced

18 Ibid., 1681. William Hearn.

19 VV&P, 1879-80, I.

20 VPD, 1878, 29, 1686.

21 Ibid., 1514.

it to a maximum of 1d and announced that two acres under pastoral licence would count as one acre for rating purposes.²²

Although the Premier, Graham Berry, answered some criticisms of the bill by reminding members that 'novel legislation' could not hope to be perfect from the first,²³ the proposals owed much to the precedents of the thistle laws. During the 1870s the enforcement of thistle control measures had devolved on the shires but, because of inadequate funding, an ill-defined administrative structure and lack of zeal, little had been done.²⁴ The Rabbit Nuisance bill sought to make rabbit control work better, without changing the basic premises of the Thistle Acts, namely that eradication was the responsibility of the landholder and government financial involvement should be as small as possible.

Under the new measure municipalities could proclaim any district rabbit infested and then raise a vermin levy to pay for inspectors. If a council proved dilatory ten rate-payers could petition the government to have their district proclaimed. When owners or occupiers failed to act on an official warning to destroy rabbits, the council could arrange for men to enter the land, do the work, and

22 Ibid., 1514-6; 1541.

23 Ibid., 1521.

24 Noxious weed legislation is discussed in Chapter 3.

then sue for the return of costs. There would be a £10 penalty for deliberately releasing rabbits and the government offered councils a 10s subsidy for every pound raised by the vermin rate. This money was to be spent by the councils on dealing with unoccupied crown lands. Councils could also order the destruction of brush, timber or stone fences that harboured rabbits.

Predictably the strongest opposition came from the Legislative Council where plural voting and a property qualification for members ensured pastoral dominance. Charles Sladen rejected all the principles of the bill 'except as to the one which says that the owner or landlord of land shall be responsible for clearing it of rabbits'.²⁵ Under pastoral licences the government was the landlord. His view was endorsed by the equally influential western district pastoralist, Neil Black, who claimed that passage of the legislation would be 'a national calamity'.²⁶ Both men argued that the only landlord who was not working to destroy rabbits was the colonial government, and that there would be no need to set up an elaborate structure to coerce individual landholders if the government did its duty. On the other hand, William Hearn inadvertently illustrated the weakness of their case by arguing that 'a man is not answerable for the nuisance of rabbits any more than he is

25 VPD, 1878, 29, 1678.

26 Ibid., 1681.

answerable for the nuisance of any other troublesome creature which may happen by some unfortunate means to come upon his property'.²⁷ He was a firm advocate of voluntaryism, but he would not volunteer. Instead he preferred to rely on cats or some other natural enemy of rabbits, like the weasel, to clear his land. The legislation was not read a third time.

Despite its failure the 1878 bill is significant for what it shows about contemporary attitudes. Most members of both Houses admitted some sort of legislation was necessary to achieve co-ordinated action in infested regions, and all looked to local rather than central administration. It was also apparent to all participants that there was a fundamental relationship between land legislation and vermin control. Rather surprisingly the idea of dealing with the rabbit by utilizing it was not developed. Longmore told two members, David Gaunson and John McIntyre, who asked about this possibility, that rabbit skins were too cheap and were not worth saving in summer, and that few people in infested districts ate rabbit flesh.²⁸ Yet in 1863 the Castlemaine Advertiser had praised a large warren established near Guildford, which was supplying Castlemaine and Daylesford with fresh rabbits,²⁹ and there was a rabbit

27 Ibid., 1685.

28 Ibid., 1518; 1522.

29 Victorian Lands Department, Stock History file.

preserving company operating successfully in Kapunda, South Australia from 1877 to 1879.³⁰ The commercial potential of the rabbit trade was soon to become a contentious issue. As regards practical points of administration the bill did not provide a forecast of the way Victorian legislation was to develop over the next decade as successive governments fumbled to create a workable policy.

In 1880 Richard Richardson introduced another bill on behalf of the new Berry ministry. Again it was claimed that Victoria was following the example of South Australia, but the legislation was much milder than that colony's, or than Longmore's.³¹ It excluded all pastoral tenants pending a settlement of the Mallee lands question and made no provision for any vermin levy. Local councils could hire inspectors who would have right of entry to all occupied land. When a landholder did not respond to the formal warning the inspector could hire men to clear the property and then sue for costs. An occupier with less than five years of his lease to run was entitled to a rebate from his landlord. As in 1878 it was proposed to destroy fences which sheltered rabbits. The Board of Land and Works could appoint bailiffs to oversee the clearance of unoccupied crown lands, but although the Legislative Council changed the phrase 'may appoint' to 'shall appoint' bailiffs, the

30 Information by courtesy of Dr K. Farrer, Kraft Foods Ltd., who is writing a book on the history of food technology.

31 VPD, 1880-81, 34, 541 ff. Rabbit Suppression Act, Vic. DCLXXXIII.

effectiveness of the measure would hinge on the finance allocated from consolidated revenue.³² Both Houses recognized this weakness but no-one advocated the imposition of a special tax. Council members wanted a large sum, perhaps £20,000, placed on the estimates to be spent on crown lands and they recommitted the bill in the hope of getting such an assurance.³³ It was not forthcoming. Although it was late in the session and the legislation could have been delayed until it lapsed, it was pushed through on condition that it operated only until December 1882.

There were no clear lines of division in the debates. Rabbits affected large and small holders alike, farmers as well as graziers. In the eyes of all groups the crucial problem was how to deal with unoccupied and occupied crown land. The Mallee Lands Act was intended to cope with the second but only hesitant steps had been taken towards the first. As Powell has pointed out in his analysis of the land debates in the 1880s, the rabbit problem did not lead to special land legislation but it reinforced the need for careful re-assessment of land policy, as well as taking up valuable parliamentary time.³⁴

32 Ibid., 1206.

33 Ibid., 1256.

34 J.M. Powell, The Public Lands of Australia Felix - Settlement and Land Appraisal in Victoria 1834-91 with Special Reference to the Western Plains, Melbourne, 1970, p. 203.

The 1883 Mallee Lands Act made destruction of vermin within three years one of the lease covenants on Mallee blocks and allotments. The area was also divided into vermin districts under five-man elected local committees. Voting was based on a graduated franchise and those elected had to hold 1,000 sheep or 250 cattle, or manage 5,000 sheep or 1,000 cattle, or pay £10 p.a. rent. It was expected that self-interest would keep these men from ignoring the covenant or, conversely, setting too high a vermin levy (which could be based on acreage or stock holding). The local committee could declare scalp bounties on any declared vermin and could authorize eradication work if lessees were negligent, and then sue for reimbursement.

The next year seven boards were created to cover 11½ million acres. The northern, north-eastern and north-western boards covered the large interior Mallee blocks while the four other districts on the fringe consisted of Mallee allotments. Each board included one member who lived near Melbourne. It was hoped that this would make it easy to hold joint conferences with Lands Department officials and to arrange united action.³⁵ The first conference was called for 30 January 1885. All boards had set a rate of 2s 6d per square mile and the department

35 Australasian, 24 January 1885, p. 159. This paper was produced by the Argus for rural readers in particular. It incorporated the Yeoman and Australian Acclimatizer in 1864.
All the information in this paragraph comes from the one article.

expressed satisfaction at the kind of men elected, particularly for the Mallee blocks. The northern board (South Australia to Euston on the Murray) was headed by A.H. Pegler, a member of a pioneer family. Edward Lascelles, who leased a considerable area and was an active, innovative pastoralist very interested in dry farming techniques, was chairman of the north-eastern district (near Swan Hill) and William McDonald of Nhill, another pioneer with a record of intelligent property development led the north-western board. Once the boards began to function all of Victoria was covered by locally administered vermin control authorities. Rabbit-free areas did not invoke their new powers but, theoretically, Victoria should have been ready to begin concerted destruction campaigns. They did not take place.

By 1884 it was clear that rabbits were still spreading. The 1880 act (and its slight 1881 amendments) had been re-adopted but was not working successfully. Representatives of shires and agricultural societies met at Kirks Bazaar, the Melbourne horse sale yard, in September 1884 and petitioned the minister to raise the government subsidy to the shires, to lift the 25 per cent duty on wire netting and to pass a land bill similar to the Mallee Lands Act. Albert Tucker, the Lands Minister in the conservative Service government, promised a bill but he said that he believed that conditions were only bad in the Mallee and Wimmera. In his opinion 'local bodies combined, or some other body apart from the government would constitute

the most effective administrative agency'.³⁶ The shires received draft copies of the proposed bill but some took so long to respond that the legislation was not presented until the end of the session.³⁷ It is an indication of the lack of serious divisions within parliament over the rabbit problem that the legislation moved quickly through all stages and was proclaimed in less than two weeks.³⁸ It may also be taken as an indication that, as yet, the law was not biting deeply.

Apart from the Mallee all crown tenants were included. The Lands Department could appoint inspectors for crown lands and could contract with the municipalites for the destruction of rabbits on unoccupied crown land. Some legal problems associated with the recovery of costs on behalf of councils were removed and the government could order councils to arrange to act together against rabbits. Where a council proved reluctant to implement the act ten rate-payers could petition for the establishment of a local committee of five to take over vermin eradication. Destruction of any animal declared a natural enemy of the rabbit was punishable by a fine of £2 to £10. Other clauses were the same as in the 1880 act.

Several voices were raised against the principle of handing over the clearance of crown lands to the shires

36 Ibid., 6 September 1884, p. 442.

37 VPD, 1884, 47, 2493.

38 Rabbit Suppression Act 1884 Vic. No. DCCXIII.
12 December.

but the matter was not pursued.³⁹ Nor was attention given to the plea from the Ballarat stud sheep breeder, Philip Russell, in the Legislative Council that the sale of rabbits should be forbidden because in some areas, notably around Camperdown, rabbits were being reared rather than exterminated.⁴⁰ On the other hand, as in the 1880 debate, anxiety was expressed over the clauses empowering councils to destroy fences which harboured rabbits. However, no changes were made.

The steady procession of rabbit bills during the 1880s suggests that all was not going well, but the debates only hint at the problems. Comparable debates taking place in New South Wales at this time were much longer and far more bitter and divisive. This says more about the social composition of the two parliaments and the stage they had reached in their land development policies than it does about the relative seriousness of the rabbit problems. In Victoria the period of struggle between selectors and squatters was nearly over. In New South Wales the movement to 'unlock the lands' was reaching its peak. Possibly Victoria was fortunate that the areas most favoured by the rabbits in the early 1880s included both the prime, well settled land of the western district, and the newly opened Mallee and Wimmera. A wide range of interests were

39 VPD, 1884, 47, 2474-75. Henry Wrixon (a lawyer) and Thomas Langdon (grain merchant and Mallee farmer).

40 Ibid., 2491.

affected and as many small landholders on the Mallee fringes hoped to take up grazing land in the central Mallee, old divisions of interest were becoming blurred. This smoothed the way for legislation and only the newspapers show the extent of local disagreements over vermin control policies.

Understandably the fencing destruction provisions aroused the most rural anxiety. As one selector pointed out in 1885, he and his neighbours had gone into debt to build brush fences which they were now ordered to replace.⁴¹ Those who had erected stone fences faced even greater loss. There is little information about how many fences were pulled down but brush and log fences were still common in the 1890s. A family history of the Kimbolton sheep station, now under Lake Eppalock, records that rabbits were a serious pest in the 1890s, and notes that they could be heard squealing in the brush fences during bush fires.⁴² This was a prosperous station but the owners had obviously not been forced to destroy rabbit harbours.

Many shires were divided over how much effort they should put into rabbit destruction. The Hampden shire, near badly infested Camperdown, was one. A councillor described the conference held in Melbourne in 1884 as 'perfect farce ... people in the north had got the matter up to extract a

41 Australasian, 30 October, 1880, p. 510.

42 J.O. Randell, Kimbolton, Carlton, Victoria, 1976, p. 66.

little more money from the Treasury'.⁴³ Perhaps the proximity of large rabbit canning works had something to do with his attitude. On the same page of the Australasian it was reported that 1,000 Wimmera farmers on a combined agricultural and spring shopping visit to Melbourne had taken time off from their sight-seeing to arrange a delegation of 150 men to petition the Minister for Lands for rigorous application of the Rabbit Nuisance Act. In December 1884 100 farmers met at Nhill and thanked the Lowan shire for its efforts against the rabbits but decided to ask the government to take full control of all vermin eradication.⁴⁴ However, in the same month a correspondent repeated a frequently heard plea for the formation of local rabbit leagues to take charge of rabbit extermination.⁴⁵

During the 1880s the government was reluctantly drawn into a more active role. South Australia requested collaboration over the erection of vermin-proof border fencing.⁴⁶ The barrier was begun in 1885 and by 1887 £23,642 had been spent on 87 miles of border fence and on a 213 mile fence between the Mallee blocks and the Mallee allotments.⁴⁷ Expenditure on unoccupied crown land also

43 Australasian, 6 September 1884, p. 447.

44 Ibid., 6 December 1884, p. 1067.

45 Ibid., 20 December 1884, p. 1163.

46 Town and Country Journal (Melb), 1 August 1885.

47 VV&P, 1887, I, 1051. Return on rabbit destruction costs.

rose. By 1889 it averaged £20,000 p.a.⁴⁸ In addition there were the subsidies paid to the shires for their vermin work. The amount was not specified in the act but in 1885 Wimmera shire was told that the minister would pay 10s for every pound.⁴⁹ Total government vermin expenditure over ten years came to between £145,000 and £160,000, most of it spent after 1884.⁵⁰ This was much less than the New South Wales government laid out between 1883 and 1887, but during those years the larger colony was paying at least three-quarters of all vermin control costs. During the 1890s the New South Wales picture was very different. Private expenditure on rabbit control in Victoria during the 1880s was reported to be high.⁵¹ Individual property accounts

48 VPD, 1889; Victorian Year Book, 1895-98, p. 924.

Expenditure for destruction of rabbits on crown lands:

1879-80	£ 1,280	1889-90	£24,860
81	2,600	91	37,913
82	12,890	92	39,535
83	9,883	93	30,595
84	10,063	94	12,514
85	22,177	95	8,909
86	24,833	96	11,831
87	21,065	97	13,425
88	20,551	98	14,303
89	17,621	99	14,753

49 Australasian, 10 January 1885, p. 79.

50 VPD, 1889, 60, 694; 699.

51 Ibid., 695; 1841; Victorian Year Book, 1893, p. 311. One owner had spent over £6,000 clearing his estate; M. Kiddle, Men of Yesterday: A Social History of the Western District of Victoria 1834-1890, Melbourne, 1961, p. 321, some Western District landowners spent up to £40,000 in a few years to bring the rabbits under control.

may be misleading but the value of imported wire netting indicates growing investment.⁵² As well as buying the wire landholders had to erect it and also employ men to trap or poison on their land. The amount of private and public capital tied up in vermin control work was already considerable.

Many settlers and members of parliament had come to see wire netting as the necessary first step to solving the rabbit problem. Because Victoria had long established fencing laws regulating cost sharing between neighbours there were firm legal precedents on which to act. This gave Victoria a decided advantage over New South Wales. The fencing compensation arrangements in the Mallee Lands Act aroused no dissension, but in New South Wales similar proposals were hotly debated because they would make future selection more expensive.⁵³ The more rapid acceptance of

52 Victorian Year Books, 1879-1894.

Tables of Imports. Value of imported wire netting.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Value f</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Value f</u>
1880	1,251	1887	12,805
1881	2,085	1888	28,247
1882	2,428	1889	29,915
1883	5,035	1890	110,423
1884	6,413	1891	134,597
1885	12,671	1892	64,797
1886	12,215		

The average cost was £18 to £20 per mile.

53 NSW policy is discussed in Chapters 5 and 7.

wire netting in Victoria was due more to these factors than to the smaller size of the properties. In New South Wales it was actually the holders of the massive western stations who led the call for fencing legislation, whereas in the south selectors were prominent, if not leaders, in the agitation to rabbit-proof boundaries.⁵⁴

In September 1887 two important rabbit conferences were held. At a preliminary meeting of delegates from rabbit-infested shires on 7 June at Bacchus Marsh, nine councils discussed a number of issues. They decided to ask for a uniform bounty rate on rabbit skins, to be subsidized by the government at up to half the cost. They also wanted increased power for government inspectors, the grouping of properties for the erection of netted boundary fences, and an easier way of getting back the money spent on the compulsory clearing of private property by inspectors. When these motions were passed on to the main meeting of Shires at Kirk's Bazaar on 24 August the shires voted by a two-thirds majority to ask the government to take full charge of rabbit control, because it was proving too expensive and time consuming.⁵⁵ On 9 May 1888 a deputation of country members of parliament and the representatives of 25 shires, led by Walter Madden, the member for the Wimmera, presented a petition to this effect to the Premier, Gillies.⁵⁶

54 VPD, 1889, 62, 1923.

55 Australasian, 3 September 1887, p. 445 (both meetings).

56 Argus, 9 May 1888.

In July of the following year the legislation was introduced.

The 68 clause bill had been circulated to all shires and had received wide approval.⁵⁷ This cut the ground from under those members of the Legislative Council who saw it as 'another step in the direction of centralization'.⁵⁸ Considerable diplomacy seems to have been employed to present the measure in a favourable light. Although Madden referred to it as 'simply a consolidating bill with two new principles grafted onto it',⁵⁹ it was a strikingly new departure in Victorian vermin policy. New South Wales had just ended its attempt at centralized vermin control with a debt of about £500,000, but Victoria was undeterred. Although the work of the so-called Inter-colonial Rabbit Conference arranged by New South Wales in 1888 was widely commented upon in the rural and city press, there was no call to delay action in Victoria while the commission discovered if there was a way of wiping out rabbits by using some disease. The commission was headed by a Victorian, Dr Harry Allen, and the Lands Department was kept well informed, but the long, expensive inquiry was not made a pretext for official inactivity.⁶⁰

Under the 1889 Rabbit Destruction bill (later

57 Australasian, 13 July 1889, p. 67.

58 VPD, 1889, 62, 1917.

59 Ibid., 1889, 60, 697.

60 Discussed in Chapter 6.

renamed the Vermin Destruction Act)⁶¹ government inspectors became responsible for the whole state. The Mallee vermin boards remained but the inspectors were departmental employees. Shires could legally offer bonuses for other declared vermin, including foxes, dingoes and wallabies but there was no provision for a government subsidy. In most years partial reimbursement was made, but it was a discretionary action and so Victoria never accumulated the enormous debts that had crippled the administration of the 1883 Rabbit Nuisance Act in New South Wales.⁶² The financing of the clearance of crown lands remained vague, depending on how much money was set aside in the budget. Fencing was greatly encouraged. After receiving a petition from a majority of landholders occupying at least half the land in a designated area, the shire could apply for an interest-free loan from which advances could be made. Landholders had ten years in which to repay the capital and eight per cent interest. The debt became a first charge on the land. It was expected that the interest would cover the costs incurred by the shires. The shires were also expected to organize group fencing for adjacent small blocks.

An attempt had been made to initiate a similar project by regulation some months before. The original proposal had been to make the shires directly responsible

61 Vermin Destruction Act 1889, 53 Vict. No. 1028, replaced by Vermin Destruction Act 1890, 54 Vict. No. 1153.

62 See Chapter 8. Also the Year Books for the 1890s.

for guaranteeing the loans to settlers, but the Crown Solicitor had ruled that no shire could legally offer security for such a loan. Nevertheless, two councils went ahead and took the interest-free loans.⁶³ There had been no outcry against this rather radical move on the part of the conservative Gillies government. Nor had there been any objection from the protectionists when the 25 per cent duty on imported netting was dropped in 1887. There were many calls for the officially free-trade government in New South Wales to take the same step, but the bounty remained until 1896. Perhaps the fact that Lysaght, the only Australian netting manufacturer, was a New South Wales company, influenced the Victorian decision, but both cases also show the lack of sectional political rigidity in the Victorian parliament as regards rabbit policy. The rest of the legislation related to the rights of inspectors, fines, prohibitions on the keeping of live vermin, destruction of fences which harboured vermin, the recovery of money spent on compulsory clearance work, protection of animals which destroyed vermin and cost sharing between landlords and short-term tenants. All these matters had been set out in earlier legislation.

The diplomatic approach adopted is shown by three new features of the act. Rabbits were still scarce in Gippsland, so for the sake of these regions wallabies were included as vermin.⁶⁴ Because many shires had been paying

63 Ibid., 1889, 60, 697.

64 Ibid., 1889, 62, 1919-20.

for fox scalps councils retained the right to use their funds for bounty payments. Most importantly, the shires were not totally excluded from the operation of the new legislation as some members of parliament wished. This helped to soothe those members of the Legislative Council who strongly opposed centralized control, and also made it easier for the Lands Department, which was spared direct responsibility for assessing mortgage security. The debate took longer than for previous measures but revealed remarkable unanimity. City members were praised for 'the handsome manner in which they have expressed their readiness to assist in the speedy passage of this Bill'.⁶⁵ After a few legal technicalities were resolved the following year by the 1890 Vermin Destruction Act, vermin control in Victoria became the responsibility of the Lands Department, and has remained so.

Despite its easy passage the new act soon ran into criticism and difficulties. A meeting of municipal representatives in 1890 asked for a royal commission. Their main objection seems to have been to the increased destruction of brush fences.⁶⁶ In 1890 £150,000 was provided for fencing loans. It was rapidly exhausted and some shires were held to have been rash in their requests and negligent about trying to organize group fencing. The quality of the fence

65 Ibid., 699.

66 Ibid., 1890, 65, 2137; 2570.

construction was also criticized.⁶⁷ In 1893 the House rejected a further £50,000 advance, because it was proposed to make it interest-free but in 1896 another £50,000 was allocated at three per cent interest.⁶⁸ A much increased market for rabbit carcasses opened in the early 1890s with the introduction of freezer ships and John MacIntyre, a former minister, blamed the increased commercial value of the trade for the higher level of complaints about the act in the mid-1890s. The chief vermin inspector, Francis Allan, was a strong believer in the use of poison and, as MacIntyre pointed out, this meant that 'rabbit could not be treated as vermin and as food at the same time'.⁶⁹ Unoccupied crown lands remained a source of annoyance to landholders. Expenditure on vermin eradication increased, but, because of abandoned holdings, so did the area of unoccupied crown land.⁷⁰ However, the most serious threat to the running of a centralized vermin control system was produced by the financial crisis of the 1890s. In 1893 MacIntyre decided to cut the £33,000 vermin vote by £16,000, largely by dismissing all 64 inspectors and handing over their functions to the 264 mounted police throughout Victoria. Some police received an extra £12 p.a. to help

67 Ibid., 1895-96, 79, 4525, Adjournment debate; Victorian Year Book, 1893, p. 311.

68 Victorian Year Book, 1895-98, p. 925.

69 VPD, 1895-96, 79, 4524.

70 See footnote 48.

pay for another horse; most received nothing.⁷¹ Some proved efficient inspectors; most were too busy or were reluctant to take on such an unpopular role. It was not an arrangement that pleased the vermin branch of the Lands Department. Clearly much re-organization remained to be done before Victoria had a co-ordinated, effective policy.

New South Wales commentators often claimed that the Victorian system was a product of its more compact size. In practice this seems to have had little to do with policy formation. The pressure for centralized control came from the shires and the settlers, not from the government. Whereas New South Wales had a network of specialized rural bodies, the pastures and stock boards, in Victoria local government functions had been concentrated in the shire councils. Once the councils proved reluctant and inefficient the government had a choice between setting up new local organizations or taking charge itself. New South Wales had no compulsory local government act until 1905 and the strictly pastoral local bodies were naturally much more jealous of their right to regulate matters to do with property management than were town-based councils.

Although the Victorian Lands Department has lost or destroyed most of its early records on vermin control

71 VPD, 1895-96, 79, 4524; PR, 15 May 1893, p. 124. The Vermin & Noxious Weeds Board has a ledger and file on mounted constables who took on vermin inspection functions. Most correspondence relates to official confusion over names and allowances.

two press letter books recording the outgoing correspondence of a vermin inspector in the Mallee have survived.⁷² These provide an insight into the functioning of the vermin branch of the Lands Department in the crucial early years of centralization. They illustrate the considerable degree of independence retained by the man on the spot and illustrate how few decisions were greatly influenced by the fact that reports had to go back to Melbourne. Apart from surveyors' note books, which are entirely technical jottings, no similar records seem to have survived in New South Wales for the period when rabbit inspectors were responsible to the Department of Mines stock branch. The annual reports and special reports printed in the New South Wales Votes and Proceedings are referred to in later chapters, but they lack the detail and the sense of personality which is conveyed through the letter books.

J.M. McLeod Jr. was the inspector for the northern vermin board from 1891 to 1911. At various times during this period he was also thistle inspector, member of the northern vermin board, border fence inspector, stock inspector, census collector, fowl inspector and assessor for the closer settlement board and possibly held other minor posts. He owned several Mallee holdings worked by a manager. Judging by the few surviving department files and conversations with men now working for the Vermin and Noxious Weeds

72 MUA, J.M. McLeod Jr., Press Letter Books, Northern Vermin Board, BURR I.

Board, McLeod seems to have been typical of the local temporary officials who were employed by the Lands Department and the Agriculture Department in the early part of the century. He travelled extensively in the area and claimed to know it well;⁷³ none of his official positions paid highly, but they added up to a good income;⁷⁴ despite occasional grammatical lapses he handled the large amount of paper-work very competently.

He worked in an interesting area. His district ran from the South Australian border to east of Mildura and included the Chaffey irrigated holdings, small Mallee leaseholds and three large stations. Dingoes were still prevalent, foxes appeared occasionally, thistles abounded and of course there was the ubiquitous rabbit. Until his dismissal in 1893 as part of the economy drive he conscientiously wrote monthly reports. Even after he lost the post of vermin inspector he continued to make pertinent general comments on vermin in his border fence inspection reports, which were submitted at least quarterly. By 1904 he was again signing himself 'vermin inspector' and initiating prosecutions. Despite the many positions he held, he kept up to date with his vermin rate assessment calls, inspection warning notices, accounts and the numerous

73 McLeod to J. Hayes, 17 October 1899. He claimed to be the oldest Mallee resident.

74 McLeod to Black (Chief Vermin Inspector) 10 April 1893. As vermin inspector he received £150 p.a. By 1910 he was receiving £206 p.a. including travelling and all expenses. Victorian Government Gazette, 1911, p. 842. Persons temporarily employed.

official reports. A great deal of steady work was involved and it is likely that some men in his position would have fallen badly behind.

In March 1891 McLeod agreed to a request from his fellow vermin board members to apply for the position of thistle inspector, advertised by the shire. These assignments were a local matter and, as with similar pastures and stock board appointments in New South Wales, were often advertised with a particular candidate in mind. McLeod informed Chief Inspector Black of the Lands Department that he had accepted the post at £10 p.a. and half the taxes collected. He hoped that Black would not object: 'When I am inspecting for rabbits I can also see if there are any thistles or dogs about'.⁷⁵ He said that as the notice appeared on 9 February and applications closed on 12 February, there had been no time to consult the department. In one of the few incoming letters pressed Black replied: 'I certainly do object to your holding so many appointments. In my opinion you ought not to have applied ... but should have been satisfied with what you held under the government'.⁷⁶ However, McLeod was not a full-time, permanent public servant and although he expressed his regret, he did not offer to resign either job.⁷⁷

The most suspect aspect of a locally administered

75 McLeod to Black, 18 March 1891.

76 Black to McLeod, 25 March 1891.

77 McLeod to Black, 14 April 1891.

system is revealed by McLeod's lists of those warned and summonsed. The members of the vermin board were Messrs Crozier (Kulmine Station), Pegler (Ned's Corner Station), Robertson (Kuttyne Station), Mathers and B. Chaffey. Pegler and Chaffey both received a number of warnings about their vermin and thistles, and between 1905 and 1910 (after the end of the vermin board), Pegler was summonsed and fined at least three times under the Vermin Destruction Act. Such a situation could be embarrassing for a government employee, like a vermin inspector, but impossible for a shire employee, like a thistle inspector. In 1905 the Shire Secretary, Frank Egg, settled a vermin destruction summons out of court for 23s 6d.⁷⁸ It may be coincidence but there are no records of summonses under the locally administered thistle acts, despite the number of warnings sent out.

In 1892 McLeod responded firmly to a Chaffey Brothers' decision to reduce the number of men that they employed on vermin eradication: 'I gave them instructions today to put on more men at once as I informed them that one rabbit killed now meant hundreds less in the future'. With his local background he knew that the company was 'hard pressed for money',⁷⁹ but zeal won over sympathy. On the

78 McLeod to F. Egg, 26 October 1905; McLeod to Allen (Chief Inspector of Vermin) 6 November 1905.

79 McLeod to Black, 1 July 1892.

other hand, in 1905 he offered to drop one of two summonses against Pegler in return for a guilty plea. Pegler refused and was fined £4 and 2s 6d costs. McLeod then let the other case lapse in return for 10s 6d costs.⁸⁰ This may have been the sensible decision but it raises speculation about the kind of social and economic pressures that could be applied to the man in the field. As McLeod explained to Black, any man summonsed thought that he was being victimised and 'people that have spite against others always think that others have spite against them'.⁸¹ Shires that arranged to have vermin and weed control under the same man obviously found it convenient but the divided authority could create problems. It depended on the attitude of the shire officials whether a man who had proved his keenness as a vermin inspector would be welcome to turn the same attention against thistles. Once a man accepted the second post he was vulnerable to local pressure in both positions. There were also financial problems. As vermin inspector he was paid by the Lands Department; as thistle inspector he was paid through the rates. In McLeod's district there was an additional problem in that the Chaffey Brothers held their 250,000 acres under the Chaffey Agreement and were technically not under the local vermin board. McLeod continued his inspections and praised the brothers for

80 McLeod to Allan, 6 November 1905.

81 McLeod to Black, 14 August 1891.

employing five to seven men on full-time pest destruction.⁸²

There were many routine administrative problems. For several months McLeod was vexed by the failure of the department to send him the correct forms for dingo bounty payments. Later he was even more annoyed because the paymaster insisted that he get the counter signature of the chairman, not that of the acting chairman, which meant a trip of 45 miles.⁸³ However, even in the early 1890s, before the rail link with Melbourne, vermin control directed by the Lands Department worked remarkably smoothly. Distance could even be an asset to the enthusiastic officer. In 1892 Black sent out a general notice that expenditure had to be kept down for the next three months. McLeod replied that at present he was employing no men, but if he found badly infested areas he would have to hire labour.⁸⁴ By the time he got a reply he could have done the work. In practice McLeod had far less trouble getting prompt answers from his superiors than he did in getting his neighbours to pay their rates.

82 McLeod to Allan, 1 May 1905. Referring back to the early 1890s. Rabbits had done much to ruin the old Mildura Station, which made it possible for the Chaffey Brothers to acquire the land. (J.P. Fogarty, George Chaffey - Great Australians, Melbourne, 1967, p. 9).

The Chaffeys and McLeod had worked to reduce the rabbit plague to manageable proportions but this did not save either of them when the land boom ended and the colony entered the depression of the 1890s.

83 McLeod to Black, 26 August 1895; 29 October 1894 telegram

84 McLeod to Black, 30 March 1892.

The few matters that required urgent departmental answers were handled expeditiously by telegram. The longest delays were caused by travel problems within the district, and when McLeod's horse kicked in the side of the buggy all the reports were late. On the other hand, having a regular channel of communication to a central office could save time. McLeod wrote in 1891: 'there is a great difficulty here in getting the correct address of landholders. Buyers of Mildura lands live I think in any part of the Globe, and as a number of people only bought to sell again the allotments are continually changing hands'.⁸⁵ This was a common problem in eastern Australia. It was usual for more than half the men summonsed by McLeod to have addresses outside the district.

It is hard to assess attitudes to the rabbit problem from official correspondence because it is not spontaneous. The writer has to indicate both his successes and the need for his continued employment. In McLeod's letters overtones of resignation soon become apparent. While noting that rabbits were not numerous in August he added that the young 'seem to grow like the grass', and he was voicing similar comments over a decade later.⁸⁶ A degree of sophistication developed in handling the pest. Different poisons were used for different times of the year, as well as fumigation of burrows in the spring. Trapping was regarded as rather suspect because the squeals of

85 McLeod to Black, 22 June 1891.

86 McLeod to Black, 14 August 1891; to Allan, 11 July 1903.

trapped rabbits warned the rest and were thought to be one of the reasons rabbits had migrated in huge numbers from their original warrens. The stations near Mildura employed 20 to 40 men full-time to destroy rabbits and dingoes and when McLeod sent men to clear a property it cost just over £1 per day.⁸⁷

Judging by the tone of the letters, rabbits were treated as an unpleasant fact of life, not a potential source of ruin. McLeod thought that he had the situation in hand but he did not expect to eradicate the pest. There was an established routine, just as there was a routine for dealing with the border fence, which always needed an extra panel of netting when the river level dropped.⁸⁸ The sense of crisis was gone. This is one of the main reasons that the later stages of vermin policy formation moved so slowly.

87 McLeod to Black, 11 February 1892.

88 McLeod to Allan, 11 October 1902.

CHAPTER 3

The Triumph of Centralization - Victoria
1890-1930

When rabbits emerged from their harbours at dusk and covered the paddocks with a moving, munching blanket of grey fur it was easy to tell that there were too many. When counter-measures reduced their numbers to 10 or 20 per acre the inexperienced and the careless could be misled into thinking that the matter was no longer serious. Reduced carrying capacity, the destruction of the choicest new growth and the erosion of topsoil are not always apparent to the casual observer, or to the poorly informed man who has become accustomed to seeing his land and stock in such a condition. By the turn of the century many Victorian landholders could not remember a time before rabbits.

While familiarity did not necessarily breed contempt, it frequently destroyed a sense of the urgency of the problem. This is common where difficult situations have to be tackled year after year. A study of a recent major campaign in Queensland to eradicate pleuropneumonia, one of the world's great plague decimators of cattle, which has been present in Australia since 1858, emphasised the point:

Not all cattlemen could see any material advantage in eradicating pleuropneumonia. While it was generally not difficult to convince them of the economic benefit resulting from control, to proceed beyond this to eradication, especially when this, at least to some, appeared an impossible dream, was an entirely different matter ... They had become familiar with the disease and had learned to live with it.¹

Similar results emerged from another modern study. In 1962 the Victorian Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board launched a big rabbit eradication campaign in the Mallee and accompanied it by a sociological survey to assess reactions.² Before the campaign began farmers had complained that rabbits were increasing alarmingly and would probably eat up to 15 per cent of the sown acreage. Obviously the landholders were aware that they were losing money and they wanted action, but when the investigating team questioned the 120 farmers in the sociological sample it was clear that only 47 were in favour of the rigorous eradication procedures suggested, and 73 believed that they would not do much good. After an intensive campaign conducted through the press, local radio, public meetings and individual visits by departmental research officers and local vermin inspectors the work began.

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- 1 C.G. Newton, 'Historical and Administrative Aspects of Pleuropneumonia Eradication in Australia with Particular Reference to Queensland', Public Administration, 1974, Vol. 33, p. 57.
 2. H.A. Presser and H.M. Russell, 'Acceptance of Research Results by Farmers', Review of Marketing and Agricultural Economics, 1965, Vol. 33 (3), pp. 147-165.

Only four men in the sample did not follow the official instructions and their properties were already classed as rabbit-free. At the end of the time 104 of the original survey declared that they were in favour of what had been done and only 16 remained sceptical. The two points that can be related back to the situation confronting late nineteenth century policy makers were the degree of initial rural doubt and the amount and range of official encouragement and coercion that was needed to produce a change in attitudes among farmers, even comparatively well educated farmers living in an era of swift communications.

The modern conclusions would not have surprised the men concerned with the control of vermin in the 1890s. The Pastoralists' Review, a journal ever wary of the involvement of government officials in property management, regretted the dismissal of the Victorian vermin inspectors in 1893 and doubted the efficiency of the voluntary rabbit leagues formed in many shires, which were supposed to inspect and to help clear each others' land.³ The new head of the vermin branch in 1896, Francis Allan, was sure that more inspectors were needed to keep landholders up to the mark and to spread expert knowledge about poisoning techniques.⁴ However, very few inspectors were re-employed until 1902.

If it was hard to show landholders that self-interest should make them ardent rabbit exterminators, it was

3 PR, 15 May 1893, p. 124-5; 15 June 1896, p.193.

4 Ibid., 15 June 1896, p. 168.

many times more difficult to convince them that some plants should be destroyed at considerable cost. All vermin can be seen to damage either pasture, crops, property or stock. It was common knowledge that seven rabbits ate about as much as a sheep, that wombats made holes in fences, that wild dogs killed stock and that opossums spoiled crops and fruit. It was not as easy to say what a thistle did. Landholders who had a passion for ring-barking trees in the expectation that it would promote better pasture often had neither the capital, the equipment or the time, let alone the knowledge and inclination to encourage some plants and discourage others. 'Weed' is just a vague term for a plant growing in an inappropriate place. A noxious weed need not be poisonous. As was pointed out in the introduction, it is a plant that displaced more economically advantageous species. In well-watered parts of Victoria, *Echium lycopsis*, a two to three feet tall biennial with little purple trumpet-shaped flowers, is known as Paterson's Curse. It was proclaimed noxious around Tallangatta in 1904 and for the whole state in 1911. In arid South Australia it is called Salvation Jane and is valued as drought stock feed.⁵

Before the coming of Europeans native Australian grasses had not been subjected to the demands of large herds of hard hoofed, close cropping herbivores. Some could not regenerate quickly enough to survive. Both by accident and design new species were introduced. Many spread rapidly,

5 Parsons, Noxious Weeds, p.32.

and, because of some adverse quality, a few aroused great concern. The first weed legislation was passed in the eastern colonies in the 1850s. It was intended to control the spread of certain thistles and Bathurst burr. The former were indigestible to many stock and the latter reduced the value of the wool clip. Few settlers found anything good to say about the burrs⁶ but opinion was much divided over the value of thistles. Margaret Kiddle recounts how the influential Western District landowner, William Clarke, halted a Legislative Council debate on the topic by asserting that thistles were good drought feed.⁷ In 1891 J. Wallace told the Council that he had recently cut 20 tons of thistles on his property and that stock had eaten the lot,⁸ and it is common today to hear farmers confidently say that there is plenty of good feed in their paddocks full of thistles. Undoubtedly most thistles, apart from the flat varieties, can be eaten by mature stock, if they are sufficiently hungry. This is not the same thing as saying that they are economically advantageous or should be allowed to spread. The argument is still going on, and it is not surprising that, in the days before the development of hormone sprays and deep motor driven ploughs, when the only common counter-measures were slashing, burning and

6 For one exception see Chapter 7, p. 242.

7 Kiddle, Men of Yesterday, p. 292.

8 VPD, 1891, 68, 3256.

cultivation, opposition to noxious weed legislation was strong.⁹

The early Victorian Thistle Acts placed the onus of weed clearance on the landholders.¹⁰ Local corporations were responsible for unoccupied crown land within their boundaries and the Agriculture Board of the Lands Department was responsible for the rest. Individuals had to swear out a complaint before a Justice of the Peace before any landholder could be warned, fined, or have his land and half the adjacent road compulsorily cleared at his own expense. The 1863 Local Government Act authorized shires to appoint thistle inspectors to oversee unoccupied crown land. The inspectors could also arrange for magistrates to issue clearance notices to private offenders. Prior to this some money had been budgeted for thistle extirpation contracts¹¹ but, as the Minister for Lands, Gavin Duffy, explained, 'for some years past respective governments had come to the conclusion that money for the eradication of thistles could only be expended by local authorities, and the District Council bill [Local Government Act 1863] would direct councils to take the matter up ... the Board [Agriculture] had not thought proper to offer suggestions

9 J.W. Audas, Plants Introduced from Abroad, Melbourne, 1925 (no page numbers).

10 An Act to Eradicate Thistles and Bathurst Burrs 1856, 19 Vict. No. 14.

11 VPD, 1856-57, 1, 524, £2,000; 1859-60, 6, 929, £10,000.

on the subject'.¹² In other words, it was intended to make weed control a purely local matter. The 1865 Thistle Act¹³ incorporated the change but unoccupied crown lands outside shire boundaries remained the responsibility of the Board of Lands and Works and little money was allocated for their clearance.

In 1891 another amendment made it possible for the Governor-in-Council to proclaim any plant to be a thistle without passing a new act.¹⁴ A further amendment to place the onus on the defendant to prove that the plants on his land were not proclaimed weeds was rejected in the Legislative Council.¹⁵ By this time the list included eight thistles and Bathurst burr and there were many calls for its extension. However, there was also a strong body of opinion that the law was being taken too far. The 1893 Thistle Act was intended to be a compromise. It declared that if a plant was a localized nuisance it need not be declared noxious for the whole state.¹⁶

The first weed named under the new arrangement was St John's Wort. It had taken over large tracts of grazing land around Bright in the Ovens Valley. Stock that tried to eat it tended to become sensitive to sunlight and develop

12 Ibid., 1861-62, 8, 642.

13 Thistle Prevention Act 1865, 28 Vict. No. 250. It named five Thistles and Bathurst burr.

14 Thistle Act 1891, No. 1244.

15 VPD, 1891, 67, 3227; 3257.

16 Thistle Amendment Act 1893, No. 1337.

severe dermatitis that sometimes became fatally infected. The animals also suffered central nervous system damage, aborted easily and lost condition. However, although consistent grazing could lead to St John's Wort completely taking over the pasture, regular cultivation readily controlled it.¹⁷ Therefore the plant was not regarded as a problem in agricultural areas. Partial proclamation was expected to resolve the conflict of interest, but the transmission of seeds from waste land in non-proclaimed areas to pasture in vulnerable districts remained a problem.¹⁸

Because of the depression of the 1890s shire and government expenditure on weed control was severely curtailed, and the weeds flourished. Closer settlement schemes added a new dimension to the controversy. The voluntary surrender of large estates for subdivision began in 1898 and the first Closer Settlement Act was passed in 1904. Crop contamination and the tainting of milk were not matters that had concerned large graziers but they were very worrying to small farmers, and the encouragement of farming was a consistent feature of Victorian land policy.

Alfred Outtrim, a former Lands Minister who had just joined the Labor party, introduced an adjournment debate on the Thistle Act in 1904. He pointed out that many

17 Parsons, Noxious Weeds, p. 163.

18 The specific problem of dealing with St John's Wort is discussed in Chapter 10, p. 366.

petitions calling for stricter enforcement of the act had been received but that some shires were unwilling to initiate prosecutions or to request extensions to the list of noxious plants. He blamed the situation on large landholders who, he said, dominated many councils.¹⁹ When the Municipal Conference met in October attention was paid to the losses caused by the spread of blackberries, sweet briar, stink wort, water hyacinth and cape tulip, and the neglect of crown lands was condemned.²⁰ The same complaints were voiced year after year but positive suggestions were scarce. Instead there was immediate opposition to a vague proposal advanced by Dr S. Cameron, Director of Agriculture, that the government should become the co-ordinating body for weed control.²¹ The idea was dropped.

Late in 1914 what appeared to be the final step in the establishment of a decentralized, locally administered weed control system was taken. Municipal officers were authorized to issue notices for the destruction of weeds. Justices of the Peace retained the same right but were no longer the sole enforcement agents.²² It was hoped that this would increase efficiency and raise the status of the inspectors. The legislation aroused some debate in the Assembly, particularly over whether thistles were always a bad thing and whether the power to declare a plant to be a

19 VPD, 1904, 108, 2139 ff.

20 Age, 20 October 1904.

21 Argus, 22 April 1914; VPD, 1914, 136, 12613.

22 Thistle Act of 1890 Amendment Act 1914, No. 2555.

thistle should be vested in the shires.²³ However, as there was no legislation compelling shires to enforce the law the disagreement was not important and did not delay proceedings.

Despite the frequency with which thistle laws were mentioned critically in parliament and local meetings, there were few signs that any organized body wanted to initiate a new system. Not even the Department of Agriculture was anxious to become involved. After 1912 the policy pursued during the 1890s of conducting most research on experimental plots on private land was largely discontinued in favour of work on the three main experimental farms at Werribee, Rutherglen and Longerenong. Pasture improvement was one of the projects undertaken, but as weed control was a local responsibility, and in 1916 the annual budget of the department was still only £36,252, very little money was put into experiments on weeds.²⁴ According to popular report, until the 1950s the Lands Department did not even own a microscope,²⁵ and collaboration between the two departments varied, depending on the personalities involved.

23 VPD, 1914, 136, 1263.

24 Victorian Year Book, 1920-21, p. 532; The 1915-16 Year Book, p. 702 listed the experimental projects as plant breeding, soil renovation, cropping practices, pasture experiments, stock breeding, plant nutrition and meteorological observations.

25 Rolls, They All Ran Wild, p. 186. However, in 1934 the Lands Department established its first experimental weed plots. Victorian Lands Department, History file.

By the time war broke out there was much evidence of growing dissatisfaction at the way vermin and weed problems were handled. By 1915 4,500 men had been settled on 570,000 acres²⁶ and most were financially ill-prepared to cope with flourishing rabbits and weeds. In 1907 Thomas Langdon, a Mallee farmer and grain merchant, had moved for the establishment of a select committee to investigate the rabbit problem.²⁷ The government rejected the move on the grounds that it would constitute self-censure and indicate a lack of confidence in Francis Allan. Allan issued a statement that, since his department had moderated its policy so that fewer men were prosecuted and more compulsory clearance work was done, far fewer complaints had been received than ten years before. Country members were in rather a quandary over what they should advocate. Most were supporters of the Kyabram movement, a massive rural protest against drift and extravagance in government. They had been elected on the resulting economy ticket and were advocates of government retrenchment.²⁸ It was hard to see how vermin and weed policy could be made more rigorous without an increase in expenditure.

Despite regular challenges made during almost every supply debate from 1902 to 1915, the official

26 Victorian Lands Department, History file.

27 VPD, 1907, 116, 514 ff.

28 J. Rickard, Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890-1910, Canberra, 1976, pp. 197-8.

expenditure on vermin and weed control slowly rose.²⁹ In 1914 a pound for pound subsidy for St John's Wort eradication work was offered to the shires, but in 1917 it was noted that the £500 placed on the estimates had never been claimed in any one year.³⁰ On the other hand, fencing advances were eagerly taken up and had become the largest single item of expenditure on agriculture.³¹ As this money had to be repaid with interest to cover administrative costs and because the shires were responsible for arranging

29 Victorian Year Book, 1915-16, p. 764.

Expenditure on destruction of vermin, including shire subsidies:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount in £</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount in £</u>
1899-1900	14,801	1908	17,585
1901	15,817	1909	22,756
1902	17,250	1910	23,005
1903	16,489	1911	23,123
1904	15,759	1912	29,524
1905	16,603	1913	27,309
1906	16,477	1914	29,596
1907	16,513	1915	32,211

30 Argus, 22 April 1914; VPD, 1917, 166, 141.

31 Victorian Year Book, 1920-21, p. 531.

Money allocated for fencing:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount in £</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Amount in £</u>
1890	150,000	1914	62,428
1896	50,000	1915	19,731
1909	45,850	1916	3,078
1910	10,734	1917	3,203
1911	43,648	1918	9,472
1912	21,116	1919	3,766
1913	54,061	1920	20,985

The amounts increased during the 1920s.

security, the ultimate loss to the Treasury was small, but as the allocations figured on the debit side of the budget they could have become a political issue, except that all parties believed they were necessary. There was not even any objection to the investment in 1907 by the Bent Reform Ministry in the purchase of six wire weaving machines to be installed at Pentridge gaol. In the early years of operation a small profit was made to set against capital outlay. The wire was dearer than the contract price for British netting but it was better quality and the gaol could keep up with the demand.³² By 1916, when production had temporarily stopped because of war-time shortages, Pentridge had supplied 12,000 miles for £300,000.³³ Even conservative members did not protest at this form of state enterprise and Labor regarded it with glee.

Similarly, when the 1909 Wire Netting Act was debated no controversy was aroused by the change from the allocation of funds to the shires to the supply of netting, bought in bulk by the state.³⁴ A similar proposal on behalf of the Bruce-Page coalition in federal parliament in 1923 met a very different response and had to be dropped.³⁵ The

32 Argus, 23 March 1912, English netting £21 per mile, Pentridge £23 per mile, normal retail £28 per mile; Argus, 27 April 1914, English £23 15s, Pentridge £25 2s 6d.

33 Argus, 26 April 1916.

34 VPD, 1909, 123, 335.

35 See Chapter 10 p.382.

only serious point of disagreement in 1909 was whether shires should be compelled to contract for the supply of netting if the correct local petitions were received. Members were reluctant to make the shires take on debts which might not be repaid, and unwilling to put the state in the position of becoming the direct supplier of netting to individuals. In the end fear of the Treasury losing money because of inadequately secured advances, and objections to creating a new bureaucracy to arrange proper mortgage security led the Assembly to vote 31 to 21 against allowing direct government advances to landholders.³⁶ However, as a compromise direct advances were permitted where there were no shires, such as on French Island, or to landholders netting a boundary adjacent to unoccupied crown land. In a last minute amendment, announced during the third reading, the latter also received their wire at 80 per cent of cost.³⁷ Little by little government financial involvement was increasing and there were no distinct factional or party objections.

Despite the growth of the rabbit trade, commercial rabbit interests never aroused the depth of hostility that became a feature of New South Wales rabbit debates from the late 1880s onwards.³⁸ Rabbit canning was well established

36 VPD, 1909, 123, 338.

37 Ibid., 588.

38 See Chapters 5 and 9.

at Colac and Camperdown in the Western District by the early 1880s, and during the 1890s exports of canned rabbits averaged over 1,500 tons p.a., with a peak of 2,277 tons in 1897. These exports were worth about £25,000 p.a.³⁹ By 1894 the Department of Agriculture was experimenting with the export of frozen rabbits and a British correspondent to the Pastoralists' Review congratulated the department 'on exercising so much care in opening up this trade'.⁴⁰ The Age pointed out that a large rabbit cannery employed about 350 men for at least six months of the year and the monthly wage sheet would come to about £3,000, a useful boost to the economy of small towns. Skilled men could earn £6 per week. The paper also concluded that 'it is by no means improbable that the extension of the frozen meat trade will provide a more economical method of keeping the rabbits down than by merely poisoning them'.⁴¹

At a Royal Agricultural Society dinner in 1896 a speaker regretted the poisoning of rabbits and speculated that they might soon become 'one of our most valuable assets', and the Agriculture Department was again praised for sending packaging experts to Portland to stimulate the export of rabbits.⁴² On the other hand, there were general complaints about the increase in rabbits and many suggested that this

39 Victorian Statistical Registers; PR, 15 June 1894, p. 164.

40 PR, 15 December 1894, pp. 504-5.

41 Age 10 February 1894; 20 February 1894.

42 PR, 15 May 1896, p. 111.

was due to 'an appreciable interest in their maintenance'.⁴³ In 1898 some Romsey farmers petitioned unsuccessfully to be excused from using poison, on the grounds that 'rabbit farming is becoming a considerable industry'.⁴⁴ Every day during the winter about 40,000 rabbits were brought into Melbourne for local and domestic use.⁴⁵ However, as the Year Books pointed out, the value of exports was small compensation for the millions of pounds damage done. Nevertheless, the divergence of opinion continued and some influential men defended the trade. Professor Cherry, a noted bacteriologist and foundation Professor of Agriculture at Melbourne University, wrote an article on agricultural problems for the 1914 British Association for the Advancement of Science Conference in Melbourne, in which he referred to rabbits:

Destruction by poison is absolute waste, and extermination by disease is running counter to the law by which the virulence of the micro-organism and the resistance of the host always tend to assume a position of equilibrium. What is required is a plan by which rabbits may be exported, even at a small loss.⁴⁶

Francis Allan never wavered from a rigorous policy of rabbit poisoning. When the running debate over rabbit

43 Ibid., 15 January 1896, p. 590 quoting The Weekly Times; p. 568, general comments on Victoria.

44 Ibid., 15 February 1898, p. 620.

45 Ibid., 15 February 1897, p. 599.

46 A.M. Laughton, T.S. Hall (eds.), Handbook to Victoria, Melbourne, 1914, p. 55.

utilization surfaced in the press he was quick to send in letters arguing his case and condemning the selfishness of farmers who thought that rabbits would bring them in some easy money.⁴⁷ After his death a Labor member of the Assembly, Hogan, condemned him as a 'faddist', claiming that 'it is a crime that animals which are fit for human consumption should be destroyed in this way',⁴⁸ but Allan had been supported by his ministers and had won the praise of the Victorian editorial writers for the Pastoral Review because he ensured that the act was 'uniformly vigorously administered' and did not become the plaything of a 'handful of incompetents'.⁴⁹

When poisoning was temporarily banned within a 20 mile radius of rabbit processing works, in order to supply the war-time British demand for cheap meat, there were great protests and the ban only lasted a few months.⁵⁰ Immediately afterwards the Lands Department organized a big poisoning campaign in the Mallee and Wimmera. Despite the shortage of poison 8,000 ounces of strychnine were spread

47 Argus, 18 February 1913; 24 February 1913.

48 VPD, 1917, 166, 138.

49 PR, 16 March 1916, p. 194.

50 Ibid., 16 February 1918, p. 106. The details of commonwealth policy during the war are given in Chapter 10.

during March and April and satisfactory results were soon reported.⁵¹ For all its inadequacies the Lands Department had won a considerable degree of approval for its wide-scale rabbit destruction projects that usually took place at least once a year. They stimulated landholders to act at the best time, reawoke general awareness of the rabbit problem and were not ruinously expensive. This helps to account for the lack of organized rural opposition to centralized administration, and the strong departmental stand taken against pressure from the rabbit industry helped to prevent the growth of suspicion and bitterness that beset the New South Wales debates.

There were also social and political reasons why the New South Wales response was more hostile and fragmented. These will be discussed in chapter nine, but briefly, the radicalism of small settlers in Victoria found expression through distinctively rural movements that also drew in large landholders and some associated manufacturing interests.⁵² The Victorian Labor party did not have the support among farmers that the New South Wales party enjoyed. Many Victorian landholders, large and small, allowed trappers on their land, so there was no clear division of interests. In 1916-17 representatives of voluntary Gippsland rabbit destruction leagues met in Traralgon for a conference. A

51 Ibid., 16 March 1918, p. 208; 16 April 1918, p. 310.

52 Rickard, Class and Politics, pp. 177-80; B.D. Graham, The Formation of the Australian Country Parties, Canberra, 1966, pp. 65-80.

vocal section of the meeting advocated banning the rabbit trade, but the motion was defeated.⁵³ However, neither faction would have had much sympathy for the 60 rabbit trappers who joined the Australian Workers' Union in Korumburra, Gippsland, and promptly went on strike over the low prices paid for rabbits.⁵⁴ Trappers were seen to be aligned with the Labor party and thus with suspect city interests.

Another difference between the rabbit controversies in Victoria and New South Wales was the lack of time and money the former spent on the search for a disease that would wipe out rabbits. This is not to say that a great many farmers did not share the belief of their northern colleagues that science would find a cheap solution. The investigation of various rabbit diseases by the 1888-89 New South Wales royal commission was widely reported, as was the attempt by Dr Jean Danysz in the early twentieth century to spread a severe rabbit disease, but there were no parallel Victorian inquiries.⁵⁵ The reason probably lies in the nature of the administrative structure that had evolved. It is one thing to share an attitude or faith and another to organize and finance ways of implementing it.

The 1888-89 Intercolonial Rabbit Commission had

53 Argus, 22 April 1916.

54 PR, 16 February 1918, p. 106.

55 The investigations are discussed in chapters 6 and 9.

been formed when New South Wales was forced by the expensive failure of its initial system to try something else. The Danysz experiments were privately funded through the pastures protection boards, local bodies which had just become responsible for rabbit control in New South Wales. There were no comparable bodies in Victoria. The Lands Department was in a strong position to resist calls for expensive research work, because it had a clear policy, based firmly on landowner responsibility and the encouragement of fencing, and because the political and financial climate favoured strict economy. Allan responded to a request from the New South Wales authorities to share some of the costs of the Danysz experiments by pointing out to his minister, John Murray, that the work would be expensive and, in the light of the 1888-89 commission's findings, unlikely to succeed. If it did work it would bring such financial benefits that New South Wales would not need any financial assistance, and Victoria would inevitably benefit from the natural spread of infected rabbits.⁵⁶ This pragmatic approach must have appealed to Murray, who rejected the New South Wales request.

The Agriculture Department did not have the funds to undertake microbiological research, and anyway, rabbits were the responsibility of the Lands Department. The municipalities could have functioned as a pressure group,

56 Victorian Lands Department, Danysz file, 27 April 1905. Also referred to in the Herald, 28 April 1905. Press cutting in file.

but, because they represented diverse interests, they tended to accept the negative verdicts of the New South Wales experts who investigated the various disease proposals, whereas New South Wales rural bodies clung to their faith, despite the evidence. In 1906 the Municipal Association of Victoria stated its position: 'Whilst recognizing the importance of fully investigating any suggestion ... [the association] is strongly of the opinion that, in view of the possible danger to other forms of animal life, experiments ... should only be approved by a Committee of scientists representative of each of the states of Australia'.⁵⁷ Rabbit infestation quickly prompted some useful technological innovations, such as poison carts, exploding cartridges of fumigants and a multitude of metal traps. These inventions, if well marketed, soon paid for their development, but scientific research was a more expensive and risky venture. There were no wealthy, influential rural organizations in Victoria that were sufficiently disgruntled to take on the task themselves.

In 1915 yet another Vermin Destruction Act was passed. It consolidated the legislation relating to the powers and duties of inspectors, bonus payments for foxes, wild dogs and wombats, the vermin fencing regulations and the supply of netting. There was no parliamentary debate.

57 Ibid., 23 February 1906.

The advance of the rabbits into East Gippsland was complete but complaints about the failure to contain the problem had not produced a movement to hand over control to another authority. On the surface it seemed that the undisputed passage of both vermin and weed consolidating legislation in 1915 showed that policy for the two branches of pest control was established along divergent lines, but this was not to be the case. Although governments had shown great reluctance to increase their direct involvement, and although the sounds of dissatisfaction were far more muted than in New South Wales, the war years were to intensify the factors that had already led the state to accept a little more of the financial and administrative burden.

By 1916 the cost of half inch mesh netting (when still obtainable) had risen from about £23 per mile to £51.⁵⁸ Rural labour was hard to get and poison was scarce. Predictably, rabbits increased. However, the loudest complaints were made about the spread of weeds, particularly St John's Wort. In 1917 soldier settlement schemes were announced. The Ovens Valley was one of the chosen areas. New approaches to the problem were obviously essential. In 1916 the Victorian Farmers' Union held its first annual conference. It already had 130 branches and 2,836 members,

58 Argus, 26 April 1916.

many drawn from the marginal wheat lands of the Mallee.⁵⁹ As a result it was a more radical organization than the New South Wales Farmers and Settlers' Association had become. The platform included the ideals of the Kyabram movement, public service retrenchment, less and cheaper government and decentralization. It also specifically mentioned better methods of inspection by the Department of Agriculture and, one of the most important matters discussed was the spread of noxious weeds.⁶⁰ Despite its loudly professed objections to government expenditure and interference, ideological considerations did not prevent it being a staunch supporter of the wheat pool. The Farmers' Union was a clear indication of the growing level of political organization in the Victorian rural community and of the willingness of a potentially powerful pressure group to favour radical initiatives on the part of government.

Throughout 1917 a series of well attended municipal meetings and conferences were held about weeds. In March delegates at Bright recommended 'vigorous policy of closer settlement, going so far as forfeiture of affected lands that tenants declined to clean up'.⁶¹ Forty shire representatives met at Wangaratta in May and discussed St John's Wort eradication with Frederick Hagelthorn, the Minister for Agriculture, and Thomas Livingston, Vice-

59 Graham, Australian Country Parties, p. 110.

60 PR, 16 October 1916, p. 913.

61 Ibid., 16 March 1917, p. 204.

President of the Board of Lands and Works.⁶² In July an executive committee, appointed by the Wangaratta conference, made a series of recommendations to the government. They wanted the shires to be compelled to enforce the law, the state to take full responsibility for clearing all unoccupied crown land and a two pound subsidy for every pound spent on badly infested private land. William Hutchinson, Minister for Lands, promised to consider the first point but said that no government had or could promise to deal with all crown land, and the last point was withdrawn as unfair.⁶³

Rather reluctantly the Lands Department drafted a bill to amalgamate vermin and weed control under its supervision. The proposal suggested an advisory council of twelve shire representatives, a departmental staff of 140 inspectors (instead of the present 65) and government funding of £40,000 to be supplemented by a contribution of £12,000 p.a. from the shires.⁶⁴ Although the Pastoral Review opposed centralized control in New South Wales, the journal praised the scheme, but it met strong opposition from the shires. The minister asked the councils to comment in writing and it took over a year for all municipalities to reply.⁶⁵ Many shires referred to 'unfair taxation' or, like

62 Ibid., 16 May 1917, p. 418.

63 Ibid., 16 July 1917, p. 625.

64 Ibid., 16 November 1918, p. 1023.

65 Victorian Lands Department, Correspondence from the Shires, 1918, File Sp. 854.

Ballan, insisted that 'we cannot approve of a scheme providing for a new government department and an army of inspectors, as at present there are in our shire officers who can do the work of inspection at little extra cost'. A group of shires in the Ovens Valley and part of Gippsland, where St John's Wort was rife, were in favour, but the Gippsland Development Conference opposed the draft and suggested a 'self supporting and reproductive scheme' based on long term loans. In July 1919 the minister wrote to the Chamber of Agriculture: 'as there is not the slightest chance of getting the approval of the country members of Parliament to a scheme condemned by the Shires, I am at a loss to know how to proceed'.⁶⁶

During 1919 parliamentary discussion about vermin and weeds was divided between country members' demands that something be done to destroy both, and discussion of a petition from a Collingwood hat manufacturer, requesting price control on rabbit skins to protect his industry from American buyers who were 'rigging the market', his term for inflating prices. While Martin Hannah defended the hatters, arguing that 'the skins have been held by speculators ... the rabbit trappers have not benefited',⁶⁷ J. Cameron of East Gippsland fulminated that 'first the rabbit skins will be commandeered, then the wool, then the butter, then the beef, and eventually the wheat. The community will become

66 Ibid., 16 July 1919.

67 VPD, 1919, 152, 803. He was the Labor member for Collingwood.

the serfs of the Trades Hall'.⁶⁸ Tempers were not soothed by the fact that the commonwealth had acquired all rabbits skins during the war and had made a £200,000 profit, which was not returned to the rural sector. It was rumoured to have been used to pay retirement pensions to High Court judges.⁶⁹

Another draft bill was prepared. The new plan was to divide the state into four districts based on municipal groupings. The Shires would elect five members to each district board and the government would provide a senior inspector. There would be joint financing. The Municipal Conference again rejected the proposals on the grounds that the department should take full charge of crown lands and leave the rest of the state to be managed by the municipalities under the leadership of a supervisory board.⁷⁰ The legislation was not presented before the end of the session.⁷¹

In 1920 the Lawson Ministry promised another vermin and noxious weed bill. There was considerable scepticism about whether either the 1919 or 1920 legislation had been intended to pass. Several members of the Legislative Council speculated that Lawson was primarily anxious to preserve his close ties with the Victorian Farmers' Union

68 Ibid., 793.

69 Ibid.

70 VPD, 1919, 152, 423; 435.

71 VPD, 1919, 154, 4045; 4057. The government blamed pressure of other business.

without actually committing the government to expensive new responsibilities.⁷² The 1920 bill was basically the same as its predecessor and it also lapsed.

Early the next year a deputation of shire representatives saw the minister and asked that yet another attempt be made to frame new legislation:

We are here as landowners and taxpayers ... asking you to compel us to mind our own business. We desire that the new Act be drawn up in such a way that it would be absolutely and clearly compulsory for every Shire to destroy noxious weeds. And above all we want uniformity.⁷³

They also wanted a cost sharing arrangement and believed that the shires should remain the basic unit of administration. Although they were talking about a joint vermin and noxious weed act it was the weeds that were causing the most concern.

The reference to uniformity is key. Everyone wanted legislation for his neighbour but not necessarily for himself. Graziers and farmers differed in their interpretation of what was noxious, and both groups also differed among themselves. Some graziers argued that only aged ewes could cope with thistles, while others continued to praise the thistle as 'the friend of the grazier'.⁷⁴ Some men

72 VPD, 1920, 155, 175-76.

73 Victorian Lands Department, Sp. 854, 20 April 1921.

74 VPD, 1922, 163, 719.

believed that the simple solution was rabbit destruction: get rid of the rabbits and the improved pasture would mean that the weeds would take care of themselves.⁷⁵ If individual shires were left to declare their own lists of pests then surrounding areas would be subject to constant reinfestation. If blanket proscriptions were laid down, some areas would be obliged to undertake unprofitable clearing operations. Weed proclamation also decreased the value of land, an important consideration in a society where land frequently changed hands.

In March 1921 the minister told the shires that it was intended to divide the state into five divisions, each controlled by a board and that, if the boards failed in their duty, the government would commission labourers to do the work, and then make the shires pay.⁷⁶ The shires did not like the idea. The minister warned the delegates, 'if we beat the wind and try to get all we think necessary, we will get nothing. We have to get a workable measure that will give us a starting point'.⁷⁷

Although the Country party sided with Labor in July 1921 to defeat the government over wheat pool policy, the two parties could find no other common ground. The

75 VPD, 1919, 154, 4045. They had a case, but most could not afford the initial expense or the intensive cultivation necessary.

76 PR, 16 March 1921, p. 176; p. 260.

77 Victorian Lands Department, Sp. 854, 20 April 1921.

government elected in September was very similar in composition to its predecessor. However, perhaps aided by the fright that the Country party had given the government and itself over the possibility of a radical alliance, there seems to have been greater determination to resolve the vermin and weed issue. In October the Lands Department told the Municipal Association that the principle applied to vermin would in future be applied to weeds: the Department of Lands would take full control.⁷⁸ The shires expressed no pleasure at the idea, but they did not voice the kind of opposition that had killed a similar proposal four years before.

The 1922 bill was a non-party measure, and country members denied that they had decided to support it just because it would make city land liable to contribute to the cost of weed control.⁷⁹ Continued anxiety on the part of farmers and graziers seems to have worn down the opposition to centralization. Had not the shires in 1888 admitted their inability to control rabbits? And since then had not state inspectors proved to be more efficient vermin controllers than the councils? While warning his fellow country members to be vigilant about the intruding arm of government in rural matters, M. Wettenhall, speaking on behalf of his Mallee electors, rallied support for the bill on the grounds that it was 'an honest attempt' and

78 PR, 16 October 1921, p. 850.

79 VPD, 1922, 160, 693.

'an experiment on the part of the state'.⁸⁰ Similar phrases had been used to justify support for state financed wire netting schemes.

The legislation originally proposed departmental control of vermin and noxious weeds; utilization of existing rabbit inspectors and augmentation of their ranks; government responsibility for clearing the fringes of crown land; state instrumentalities to be responsible for clearing their own areas, and fringe clearance provisions to apply to badly affected private property, so that owners would not be beggared. It was well debated in a spirit of remarkable accord. The most important amendments were reinstatement of the idea of divisions composed of shires, to decide what plants should be declared noxious, and the establishment of an investigatory committee in the Department of Agriculture. The scheme was financed from consolidated revenue. It soon won over most of the opposition.

There were a few modifications in the next few years but I have only found one petition requesting a return to shire management.⁸¹ In February 1826 the Victorian Farmers' Union Conference at Ballarat said that the act was not adequately enforced and asked the government to set up an independent commission to administer vermin and weed

80 Ibid.

81 PR, 16 April 1925, pp. 372-73. North-eastern delegates to the Municipal Conference. They received no encouragement.

policy and to arrange scientific collaboration with the commonwealth.⁸² However, a large meeting at Nhill in April, arranged by the Chamber of Agriculture, withdrew a similar motion and instead recommended the appointment of a bright young scientist to do special research into weeds. A Victorian Farmers' Union deputation in May to the minister, Alfred Downard, withdrew the original proposal after discussion.⁸³ Significantly, neither the Chamber or the Union had requested a return to local administration. The act is supposed to have worked reasonably well until the mid-1930s, when shortages of money and equipment and a great increase in the amount of abandoned land began to take effect.⁸⁴

From 1923 Victoria had a workable vermin and noxious weed policy. The inter-relatedness of the two problems was recognized and the government did not claim that it had a quick solution. A little research had begun and efforts were at last being made to tackle the problem of unoccupied land. The Minister for Lands, David Oman,

82 Ibid., 16 April 1926, p. 292.

83 Ibid., 15 May 1926, p. 390.

84 Victorian Year Books. Annual budget allocations under the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Act, 1922.

1922-23	£54,000	1928	£86,000
1924	85,000	1929	82,000
1925	83,000	1930	71,000
1926	90,000	1931	58,000
1927	91,000	1932	51,000

gave the official view of the act: 'It does not aim at the eradication of all noxious weeds in the state, but it is an honest attempt to meet the position. No such attempt has been made within the past twenty years ... If the move is delayed country members must take the responsibility'.⁸⁵ Expenditure rose rapidly to meet the new demands.

Vermin and noxious weed legislation had taken up a great deal of parliamentary time since the 1850s (although compared with New South Wales the discussions between 1890 and 1919 were fairly short) but the 1922 act was not simply a culmination of legislative trends extending back over fifty years. The solution arrived at between 1918 and 1922 was not easy for country members to accept or economy-minded governments to propose. Manifest need for new initiatives prompted the call for legislation, but did not necessarily mean a movement towards centralization. Although that had been the pattern in rabbit legislation, it had not been applied to wire netting policy. Nor did similar problems in New South Wales lead to the same kind of legislation. Probably the most important factor was the lack of an established administrative body accustomed to speaking for a strong, unified rural interest group. The Chamber of Agriculture was a non-political, co-ordinating organization and the Farmers' Union, the Graziers' Association and the Municipal Association all held differing views on vermin and

85 VPD, 1922, 160, 947.

and weed control.

Shire concerns were very broad, and members had many calls on their time. Most of the responses to the original Lands Department survey of shire opinion in 1918 were accompanied by notes explaining that the matter could not be considered for some time, mainly because of the wheat harvest or pressure of other business.⁸⁶ The Chamber of Agriculture and the Graziers' Association both tended to oppose shire management but there were no alternative rural bodies to which they could turn. Victoria had developed a powerful system of local government in the 1850s and 1860s. It accumulated functions, so groups similar to the New South Wales pastures protection boards were not encouraged to emerge. District councils to handle purely rural matters could have been created but this would have meant additional expense and the problems of overlapping jurisdiction.

The Lands Department was well placed to take on the function of noxious weed control. The rabbit inspectors were usually also Crown Lands Bailiffs and they were accustomed to dealing with the vagaries of rural titles and the intricacies of Lands Department files. As Oman pointed out, slightly increasing the number of already overworked rabbit inspectors, and then giving them the additional job of noxious weed inspection, would end duplication and mean

86 Victorian Lands Department, Sp. 854.

less expenditure on wages.⁸⁷ The known difficulties of getting local men to police their neighbours' properties also made the centralized solution look more desirable. The local government alternative had failed, so the tendency of bureaucracies to expand to take in related problem areas was not checked, even though the politicians of the period were usually opposed to such moves. A similar phenomenon on a smaller scale occurred in Queensland and caused some amusement. The Queensland Marsupial Boards were found to be reasonably efficient agents of control, so when the dingo was classed as vermin it was also declared to be an honorary marsupial. Finally an attempt was made to have the blowfly classed as a marsupial, 'for the purposes of the act'.⁸⁸

The 1922 act did not mean the end of criticism but it did mark the end of any serious attempt to divide the two areas of pest control, or to place their administration on a decentralized basis. The shires retained only the power to recommend the proclamation of any animal or plant and to arrange bonus payments. In 1925 the last step was taken to fully centralize the system. The distribution of wire netting became the responsibility of the Closer Settlement Board, not the municipalities. The original legislation was drafted by the short lived Prendergast Labor ministry in 1924, partly because some shires were reluctant to lend

87 VPD, 1922, 160, 2430.

88 PR, 16 January 1917, p. 32.

to scrub farmers but also because commonwealth money for netting, which was supposedly reserved for the most needy, was going to be administered through the board.⁸⁹ The Country-National coalition of John Allan and Alexander Peacock, which began in November, presented the bill in December, with the additional concession that wire for netting boundaries adjacent to crown land would be sold at half price.

The Labor party gave full support. The former Labor Minister for Lands, Henry Bailey, would have liked to see the act coupled with some encouragement of rabbit trapping, through a system of price control for skins, but his speech showed that he was not an extremist:

Whilst rabbit-trapping is not considered an effective method of destroying the pest there is no doubt that, if they are thinned out by this method, the completion of the destruction of the rabbit by the landowners could be rendered much easier.⁹⁰

There was far more disagreement in the Council than the Assembly. A number of Council members argued that the Closer Settlement Board already had too many functions and that the inexperienced Country party ministers had been misled by the heads of departments into further expanding the bureaucracy.⁹¹ However, they were not prepared to

89 VPD, 1924, 168, 1834-35. Commonwealth policy is discussed in Chapter 10, p.386.

90 Ibid., 1836.

91 Ibid., 2033.

oppose a measure advocated by the Country party for the benefit of landowners.

There is no evidence that the succession of governments from 1890 to 1930 consciously worked towards the creation of a centralized, integrated policy of vermin and weed control. On the contrary, they took small steps when the need for action made continued inactivity too unpopular. The big step, the 1922 Vermin and Noxious Weed Act, was the product of four years of indecision, but like most laws, once it was passed it acquired at least the strength of inertia. Only concerted pressure could change the direction that it gave to policy, and there were no organizations able or eager to take up the challenge. In both New South Wales and Victoria there was a close connection between land policy and vermin and weed legislation but, unlike New South Wales, Victoria had resolved its basic problems of land tenure policy before the vermin and weed issue became acute. This gave an entirely different social complexion to the political scene. The Victorian pest debates did not become enmeshed in sectional and party politics and thus it was much easier to pass effective legislation than in New South Wales.

CHAPTER 4

The Advance of Rabbits into New South Wales

Rabbits drastically affected the economy and ecology of Australia and for at least eighty years vehement arguments waged among farmers, rural experts and politicians about proper counter-measures, but the only marks left are the scars on the landscape and the near extinction of the bilby, the so-called 'rabbit bandicoot', and who remembers the bilby?¹ As the price of rabbit soars in the shops the once nation-wide prejudice against admitting to a taste for rabbit is fading. He would be a foolhardy grazier who served it up for the shearers but, in the cities, rabbit is regaining its European status as game.

Not even the Australian vernacular has been noticeably affected. The 'dark horse' may turn out to be a 'fair cow' or a 'flaming galah' but never a 'dangerous rabbit'. A delightful book about childhood in northern Victoria was called Mad as Rabbits but the phrase has not slipped into general usage.² The fecundity of the rabbit was blatantly obvious, but the slighting reference to

1 Rolls, They All Ran Wild, pp. 41-2.

2 E. Lane, Mad as Rabbits, Adelaide, 1962.

'breeding like rabbits' is now far less frequently heard than the equally derogatory 'breeding like flies!'. Conversely the ravages of myxomatosis have not led Australians to describe mass mortality as 'dying like rabbits'. More significantly, the voracious rabbit appetite has not produced one common Australian simile. 'As hungry as a rabbit' has a somewhat ludicrous ring. 'As devastating as rabbits' sounds down-right ridiculous.

It has long been recognized that the Australian reaction to the rabbit menace was initially conditioned by the European image of the rabbit.³ What is often ignored is that three generations, that is nearly ninety years, of bitter experience failed to create a lasting new image and did not really shatter the old. When Queensland graziers realized that what Eric Rolls aptly calls 'the grey tide' was inexorably headed their way, a small group persuaded the Brisbane Courier to send a special correspondent to travel up the Darling in 1892 reporting on what he saw. The man selected, G.W. Keith, described his commission as follows:

to stir up the people of this colony to the destroyer that is at their gates, and to warn the country that the enemy is not to be trifled with, and that devastation follows the march of the rabbits just as surely as Death overtakes us one and all. 4

3 See Introduction.

4 G.W. Keith, Across the Rabbit Warrens of New South Wales, Brisbane, 1892, p. 3. The book was a compilation of the articles written for the Brisbane Courier and Queenslander.

This was strong stuff and the articles which followed gave dramatic glimpses of the scope of the problem, but the urgent tone of the writing was often undercut by Keith's use of the term 'bunny' for the great invader, and it was by this pet name that the rabbit was commonly known. Someone who is a 'bunny' is not a dangerous adversary; a 'sitting bunny' is not a difficult target to kill.

The importance of linguistic factors can easily be over-emphasised but before dismissing them notice how well the reverse case applies to two other anti-vermin campaigns: the persistent attacks on the dingo and the efforts made to eliminate Alsation dogs.⁵ There is no Australian pet name for a dingo and all metaphoric uses of the word convey hostility. No-one, at least till very recently, would have referred to the wild dog as a 'doggy'.⁶ Similarly when the furore about the presence of unsterilized Alsation dogs was being orchestrated by the Graziers' Association during the 1920s, innumerable writers re-inserted the inappropriate word 'wolf' (which had been in the original English breeders' registration) into the usually abbreviated name. The Alsation wolf dog (or the even more hostile German wolf dog) became an object of

5 See Chapter 9.

6 An American illustrator of popular books for young children, Richard Scarry, has made 'dingo doggy' a leading character, but he is still a villain, tearing around in a fast car, breaking rules and knocking over parking meters.

fear. Its opponents never spoke of it by its pre-World War 1 name of German Shepherd dog. That would have given the wrong impression. However black a view is taken of the dingo and the dangers of a super cross-bred, Alsatian-dingo, compared to the economic damage caused, a disproportionate amount of rural money and energy went into attacking these probably maligned canines, but, more importantly, the memory of the propaganda against them is still strong, even in the cities.

It is hard to imagine how a good public relations firm would have gone about making Australians scared of rabbits, but undoubtedly use of the term 'bunny' would have been swiftly forbidden to its copy writers, and twentieth century children would never have known the comfort of bunny-rugs, even if they were still given Beatrix Potter books uncensored. There are no present day parallels to the invasion of Australia by rabbits. The slow migration northwards through South America of the so-called 'killer bees' is hardly a fair comparison, because they cause only a fraction of the ecological havoc attributable to rabbits. However, much scientific attention is already being paid to them in North and South America, perhaps not least because the idea of advancing swarms of well-armed bees is the stuff of nightmares, not children's stories.

The northward movement of the rabbits did not

provoke the frantic response hindsight might suggest was warranted. New South Wales settlers did not 'man the barricades' or even fortify the river banks with traps, poison and the new, strengthened wire netting. Because of its implications for policy formation this requires explanation. Ignorance might be the answer; but it is hard to find out how much or how little knowledge there was.

Granted that the 'bush telegraph' was no substitute for modern means of communication, it could hardly have been a poorer source of information about the Victorian rabbit problem than were the local New South Wales newspapers. As Rolls discovered, even after the pest was well established in New South Wales there is little point studying the local press in the hopes of discovering a developing response, because most stories were not followed up.⁷ Like the weather, rabbits soon became too familiar to warrant comment. Although editors probably were concerned with 'the vigorous promotion of the material and social advancement of their town and district',⁸ their zeal was most apparent around election times and usually concerned the provision of roads, bridges, railways and local halls. Most editors in the 1870s and 1880s seem rarely to have investigated matters that were not already being discussed by their public, and they also ignored the commonplace.

7 Rolls, p. 56.

8 R.B. Walker, The Newspaper Press in New South Wales 1803-1920, Sydney, 1976, p. 176.

So, before the rabbits became obvious in a district they were rarely reported, and once they became common they were rarely worth an article.

News items in country papers often comprised an assortment of snippets. The doings of European royalty rubbed shoulders with local social events. There was a marked preference for reports of sensational crimes of violence anywhere in Australia, and papers printed a wide range of syndicated articles, often on obscure topics. It is hard to envisage the life and interests of the average reader from the subject matter of local papers. As a result rural papers of this period are not a reliable guide to the state of general knowledge on a particular matter.* The Wilcannia Times, for instance, did not mention the rabbit influx till 1886, although by 1881 the rabbits had reached Bourke and by late 1884 they were crossing the Queensland border.⁹ The editor ominously proclaimed that

* A peripheral example is the way many small, sensational stories, always located in foreign countries, did the rounds of many papers. Before assuming that such tales of incredible operations, miraculous cures, the weird doings of foreign gentry and so on are indicative of a naive, credulous public, it is worth noting that these papers had no parallel to the modern astrology columns. Interest, relevance and accuracy may have been conflicting qualities in the eyes of the local editors.

9 B. Hardy, West of the Darling, Brisbane, 1969, p. 190.

the New Year, 1886, looked 'anything but propitious', but he went on to refer to an excess of festive spirit among some citizens and a series of local accidents.¹⁰ He did not mention rabbits or any economic factors. Yet the Wilcannia rabbit inspector, Abram Clarke, claimed that the district was heavily infested by 1885.¹¹ The residents undoubtedly knew what was happening but it was not newsworthy. In September 1887 an article headed 'The Rabbit Pest' was reprinted from the Melbourne Daily Telegraph but there was no accompanying local comment.¹² Probably the paper's longest article on the pest during the 1880s was a two-column spread under the heading 'Rabbit Plague'. This was far more space than the paper usually devoted to any single topic, but the article turned out to be a thinly disguised advertisement for a local poison mixture. Readers were advised that, by use of one ton of arsenic and fifty-six gallons of ammonia a month two men had made considerable inroads into the local rabbit population.¹³

More important sources of information than the local papers were the personal and economic ties linking the settlers in the Darling and Riverina districts with

10 Wilcannia Times, 13 January 1886.

11 Royal Commission into Schemes for the Extermination of Rabbits, 1888-89, p. 89. NSWV&P, II, 187. Most bound copies omitted the evidence. Complete copies of the report and evidence are held by the Victorian Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board and the New South Wales Archives.

12 Wilcannia Times, 16 September 1887.

13 Ibid., 13 September 1888.

those in Victoria. The main lines of communication led to Melbourne, not Sydney, and many leading pastoralists had homes in Melbourne or used the Melbourne or Australian Club as a city base. There were also a number of Victorian Western District graziers who had moved out to take up pastoral leases in New South Wales. They had first-hand knowledge of what rabbits could do. As early as 1868 up to £5,000 was being spent annually by some Victorian land holders to try to clear their land.¹⁴ It is hard to believe that most settlers in southern New South Wales did not know what rabbits had done to Victoria. Nevertheless, in the early 1870s rabbits were deliberately introduced into the Riverina by property holders.¹⁵ James Ormond claimed that there were rabbits on his 800,000 acre property near Wentworth when he took it over in 1871.¹⁶ He made no effort to eliminate them. According to the South Australian chief inspector of vermin, Samuel Graü Hübbe, they were also deliberately released in the Barrier Ranges and near Menindee in 1874.¹⁷ Other rabbits found their own way. The slow moving, sand-bar and snag-ridden rivers were ineffectual barriers. Balranald and Wentworth were the breeding centres from which they gradually moved out, sometimes following

14 Kiddle, Men of Yesterday, p. 542, footnote 44.

15 Rolls, pp. 32-40.

16 Royal Commission into Schemes for the Extermination of Rabbits, 1888-89, p. 105.

17 Ibid., p. 101.

water-ways, at other times simply responding to the pressures of drought and population or the lure of favourable habitat. Itinerant workers also assisted them on their way, carrying a few pregnant does to set up little colonies of free food, far ahead of the main wave.

In part the New South Wales response may be traced to the same reason that the entire rabbit plague left such little impact on conscious Australian history: it is hard to be scared of a rabbit. However, this can only be a partial explanation. Judicious caution might have been expected, at least from the former Victorians. Yet even such a capable manager as the young Victorian Richard Gardiner Casey, who took over Kilfera Station (near Willandra Creek, Ivanhoe) in 1875 apparently saw no dangers during the prosperous years of the late 1870s. However, in mid-1881 he warned the owners about the growing rabbit menace: 'I believe ... do what we can in this style of country in three or four years they will be in possession and the place virtually unsaleable'.¹⁸ By 1880 Sir John Robertson admitted that the government should have been alarmed much earlier.¹⁹ It was not till November 1880 that an Inter-colonial Premiers' Conference discussed rabbits and then all they agreed was that action was necessary along the Victorian-South Australian border. They went no further than this vague recommendation.²⁰ Yet

18 Lord Casey, Australian Father and Son, Sydney, 1963, p. 65.

19 NSWPD, 1879-80, 3, 2986.

20 NSWV&P, 1880-81, 1, 327.

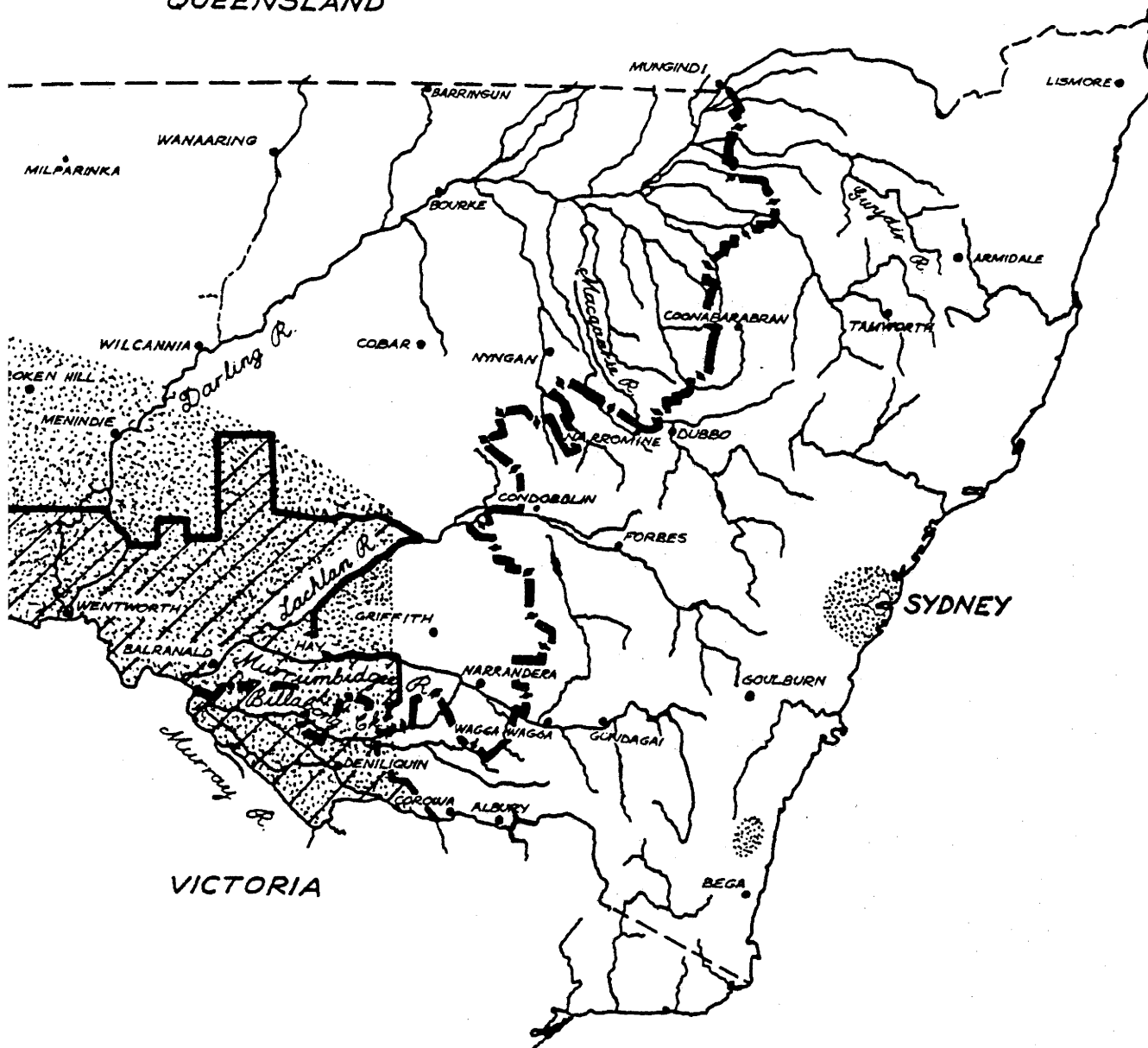
experience in the Victorian Mallee had proved that rabbits could flourish in areas drier than the Riverina and Darling frontages. There was no sound reason to expect that rabbits would not eventually make themselves prolifically at home in south-west New South Wales.

I have no intention of reworking ground so ably covered by Eric Rolls but some emphasis has to be placed on the timing of the advance and the areas in which it occurred; otherwise the nature of individual and governmental responses remains inexplicable. The advance took place along a broad, uneven front. The accompanying map is copied from ones compiled on the basis of the 1881 and 1882 reports of the inspectors appointed under the Pastures and Stock Protection Act, but they probably underestimate the spread. Aboriginal women on Murtee Station, Mt Murchison (near Wilcannia) were observed by E.F. Murphy in 1880 performing a 'nip nip' corroboree, imitating rabbits.²¹ By 1883 many of the large west Darling stations, such as Tarella, had been over-run, and the next year Queensland graziers were warned that rabbits were breeding along the Paroo River and approaching the border.²² The eastward migration was slower and far more uneven in outline because the rabbits followed the rivers and ranges.

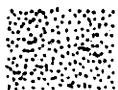
21 Hardy, p. 189.

22 T.K. Cameron, 'Queensland's Struggle Against Rabbits 1880-1930', Hist. Soc. Qld. Journal, Vol. 5, 1956, p. 1205.

QUEENSLAND



AREA INDICATED BY INSPECTORS AS RABBIT INFESTED IN 1881 { RABBIT & MARSUPIAL PEST RETURN, NSWV&P, 1881, III, 845 ff. APPENDIX }



AREA INDICATED BY INSPECTORS AS RABBIT INFESTED IN 1882 { RABBIT PEST RETURN, NSWV&P, 1882, IV, 1509 ff. APPENDIX }



EASTERN BOUNDARY OF THE DECLARED RABBIT INFESTED DISTRICTS - 1894 { ANNUAL REPORT. DEPARTMENT OF LANDS 1894, APPENDIX II }

Before 1910 they had established themselves in the Armidale district on one flank and on the Monaro tableland on the other.²³ By 1925 they were to be found along the Tweed River in the far north of New South Wales. By then, with the exception of the northern black soil plain, which rabbits did not like, the whole state was rabbit-infested. However, the early counter measures and the initial legislative response were influenced by the fact that until the 1890s the rabbit plague was primarily a southern and western problem, and it is on these areas that this chapter will concentrate.

It was not only landholders who seemed indifferent to the danger in the 1870s. The Chief Inspector of Stock's report for 1874 was extensive but contained no mention of rabbits despite the long section on the advantages of stranded wire fencing.²⁴ Perhaps it was too early to expect that there would be much general knowledge about wire netting, but the Chief Inspector was supposed to have contact with his Victorian counterpart, because of the anti-scab campaigns, and by 1874 Victoria was importing wire netting to deal with rabbits.²⁵ The 1881 return of the reports of inspectors asked to investigate the proliferation

23 Rolls, pp. 60-63.

24 Conference of the Chief Inspectors of Stock, 1874, NSWV&P, 1875, IV, 457 ff.

25 Statistical Register of Victoria, 1874.

of rabbits and marsupials clearly shows that many were surprised by their own findings. Their districts were so vast that their routes could only cover a small portion of the country and their time on the move was limited by the amount of paper work required.²⁶ However the New South Wales Blue Books, showing length of service, indicate that these were, by and large, very experienced men, and therefore used to observing changes in stock and pasture and to collecting rural gossip. Their surprise is a measure of the insidious nature of the invasion. This suggests part of the answer to the question why landholders were not more alarmed about rabbits. Rolls concluded that before the problem became obvious most farmers did not believe that rabbits would prosper in New South Wales, and afterwards they believed that individual action was too late.²⁷ This is hard to dispute. The pattern has been repeated too often with too many pests all over Australia. However, with rabbits the middle stage, the period between disbelief and fatalistic acceptance, was probably very important, helping to counteract the warnings that should have been heeded from Victoria and South Australia.

Rabbits had been known around the Riverina and Darling areas for nearly ten years before the numbers started to cause concern. That was plenty of time for the

26 Rolls, pp. 93-94.

27 Ibid., p. 46.

traditional European attitude to be reinforced. Without doubting that things were bad in parts of the two neighbouring states it was easy to see these occurrences as aberrations. Large properties, dense scrub and a quiet invader made early recognition of the danger difficult. Dingoes howl their presence and mauled sheep are soon spotted. Rabbit-damaged grazing pasture is not so easily recognized and a breeding colony in mallee scrub is not nearly as obvious as a mob of kangaroos breaking through a wire fence or bounding across the horizon.

A Deniliquin grazier, Alexander Wilson, supposedly warned a meeting of stockholders about the danger of rabbits in the area in 1877, but he was ignored.²⁸ The first calls for government action came two years later in the form of a petition from Hay, which attracted few signatures, and in the annual report of the Chief Inspector of Stock, Alexander Bruce.²⁹ Bruce commented on the rapid spread of rabbits on the Lower Murray and their incursions along the Murrumbidgee. He wrote that 'it is very necessary that effective measures should be introduced for their eradication'.³⁰ However, when he asked 36 local districts whether they wanted legislation 18 favoured action against dingoes but 13 opposed; 19 wanted effective

28 Australasian, 31 December 1881, p. 858.

29 Rolls, p. 105; NSWJLC, 1879-80, Mines Department, Annual Report, Stock Branch.

30 Ibid.

measures against marsupials but 11 said they could manage, and 14 would support legislation to combat rabbits but 15 would not. The rest could not make up their minds. Considering that there was no Victorian legislation till 1880 the government's action is more remarkable for its promptness than its inadequacies. The Australasian pointed out that at the time New South Wales and, incidentally, Queensland, were looking for effective government action, the Victorian Minister for Lands was still talking in terms of sending 'town loafers with mongrel dogs' to deal with the pest in the north-west.³¹

In 1880 Sir Henry Parkes introduced the Pastures and Stock Protection Act.³² It provided that all sheep district boards, unless exempted by the government, would have three additional members, elected by large stockholders. The new boards would be responsible for ordering landholders to destroy rabbits and other noxious animals, such as marsupials and native dogs, as well as their harbour. When landholders did not comply within 28 days the board could do the work and then sue for repayment of costs. Stockholders would be levied to provide a fund from which the administration of the act and the provision of scalp bounties would be financed. The debate was perfunctory in the Legislative Assembly and short but interesting in the Council.

31 Australasian, 31 December 1881, p. 858.

32 44 Vic., No. 11.

There were three main speakers. All were pastoralists and all adopted different positions, not necessarily related to their personal experience of rabbits. Sir John Robertson presented the legislation in the Upper House. His own property lay on the rabbit-free Liverpool Plains but he referred to the serious situation in Victoria and argued that rabbits should be treated with as much rigor as scab-infested sheep.³³

Charles Campbell, who admitted to two years' unsuccessful effort to breed rabbits on his Canberra property, disputed that rabbits were such a menace. The Belgians made a handsome profit from them and he could not see why Australians should not do likewise.³⁴ In his opinion the root of the problem was that some men held more land than they could properly manage. They should be penalized, not the whole colony:

Why should gentlemen who settled in the country be prohibited from having rabbits? ... He did not see why a man should not keep even fifty rabbits. It was monstrous to enact that if a man wished to have game he should be compelled to destroy it. ³⁵

The middle ground was occupied by Sir John Hay, who had threatened land on the Murrumbidgee. He drew attention to the fact that the government could exempt those sheep districts where rabbits were not a menace, and he observed that the boards themselves could be relied upon to know

33 NSWPD, 1879-80, 3, 2987-8.

34 NSWPD, 1879-80, 3, 2990.

35 Ibid., 2988.

where action was needed.³⁶ Thus in the very first debate three of the main themes of future vermin legislation had been introduced: the degree of autonomy to be retained by the local authorities; the value placed on rabbits by some sections of the community; and the possible conflict of interest between large and small landholders, more specifically between squatters and the rest.

The speedy introduction and easy passage of the measure seems to have been due to three main factors. The first was that the experiences of Victoria and South Australia proved that once rabbits started to multiply unchecked, worse could be expected. This particularly influenced Robertson, who took considerable interest in the legislation. Secondly, although rabbit infestation was new, it fitted easily into a long recognized vermin problem, namely what to do about wild dogs and marsupials, and to a lesser extent, domestic cattle, pigs and horses that had gone wild. The new act did not cover only rabbits, and whereas there had been virtually no outcry about them, there had been many complaints about other forms of vermin. Stock inspectors' reports regularly referred to them and during the 1878-79 session a private bill had been introduced to facilitate the destruction of marsupials.³⁷

36 Ibid.

37 NSWV&P, 1878-79, 7, 891-3, 889. (Petitions from New England, 264 signatures and from Gwydir, 254 signatures; R. Webster, *Bygoo and Beyond*, Ardlethan, N.S.W., 1956, p. 121 for accounts of the problems of domestic stock that had gone wild.) NSWV&P, 1878-79, Table of bills introduced. Dillon's Marsupial Destruction Bill withdrawn in the Assembly.

Thirdly, the act broke very little new ground. One speaker, Thomas Holt, a well travelled, wealthy, former wool-buyer, financier and pastoralist, objected to the right of entry given to inspectors as 'a great infringement on the rights of private property'.³⁸ However, there was a strong tradition in England of legislative interference in agriculture to regulate the actions of neighbours.³⁹ Moreover, scab inspectors had long had the same authority. In fact the Pastures and Stock Protection Act was a fine example of the accumulative nature of legislation.

In 1883 the Minister for Mines, Joseph Abbott, told parliament that he did not know why rabbit control fell under his jurisdiction: 'the matter appears to have been placed in the department over which I preside for no other reason than that I can see than that rabbits are very industrious miners'.⁴⁰ The real answer lay in the anti-scab legislation of the mid-nineteenth century. In 1864 scab districts were proclaimed and the stockholders elected a sheep board in each area to administer the act and to nominate inspectors.⁴¹ The government appointed a chief inspector responsible to the Secretary for Lands. The act was soon amended to increase the powers of the inspectors.⁴² At this time the Lands Department was also

38 NSWPD, 1879-80, 3, 2988.

39 L. Peel, Rural Industry in the Port Phillip Region 1835-1887, Melbourne, 1974, p. 121.

40 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 287.

41 27 Vic., No. 6 which replaced 17 Vic., 27 & 24 Vic. 15.

42 30 Vic., No. 16.

responsible for goldfields and mining. When a separate Mines Department was created in 1874 a number of functions dealing with the occupation and utilization of land, not subdivision or ownership, were passed to it, to reduce the work load of the notoriously slow Lands Department. As a result the new department formed a stock and brands branch, which ultimately inherited the rabbit problem.⁴³

It is important to remember that in New South Wales, unlike in Victoria, no district could be compelled to become an incorporated body with all the associated legal rights and responsibilities and, according to Parkes, in 1881 only one one-hundred-and-eighty-sixth of the colony was administered by local government bodies and only 98 municipalities had been incorporated.⁴⁴ Therefore, those framing vermin acts could not utilize a colony-wide system of local government, such as the Victorian shires. If local administrative authorities were desired they had to be created, which was slow and expensive, or use had to be made of existing bodies, such as the sheep boards, which were naturally sectional in interests because of their origins. Despite a plethora of bills during the last quarter of the nineteenth century New South Wales did not pass a Local Government Act till 1905.

The Pastures and Stock Protection Act also drew

43 A separate rabbit branch was formed, which lasted till 1888. See p.149 for later administrative history.

44 NSWPD, 1881, 4, 1364.

on the precedent of the Native Dog Acts, which made the killing of native dogs an occupier's responsibility, but allowed a proprietor who laid poison up to his boundaries to recoup some of the cost from his neighbours.⁴⁵ Bonuses had long been paid for scalps and the levying of local taxes for local expenditure was also an established practice. By making each board responsible for its own vermin levy the new act sought to avoid the dilemma of deciding whether action by one group that benefitted all should be paid for by that single group or the whole community.

Just as the Pastures and Stock Protection Act relied on the precedents of the Scab Act for its administrative structure, so the act looked no further than current rural policies for its practical remedy. It was based on the assumption that landholders could and would kill rabbits, just as they had been prepared to tackle other forms of vermin. This simplistic approach was shared by the weekly companion to the Evening News, the Town and Country Journal, which commented on the 'arbitrary nature' of the fines stipulated, but concluded that they mattered little because 'evasions of the law will be rare'.⁴⁶ There was no suggestion that it might be necessary to look for new weapons, that poisoning, trapping and fumigation might not be enough

45 39 Vic., No. 15 (1853 Dog Act).

46 Town and Country Journal, Sydney, 21 August 1880, pp. 354-55.

and that not everyone would vigorously pursue even these measures.

The 1881 report of inspectors on the increase of rabbits and marsupials quickly illuminated one inadequacy of the act. Inspector McClymont summarized the situation in the Wentworth district as follows:

Very little has been done to destroy rabbits in this district. Owners are very supine. No meeting of the Board held this year. Directors absent out of the colony. 47

In the Balranald district the inspector reported that he had found rabbits on 152 holdings but that efforts to kill them were being made on only 106. Things were worse around Deniliquin where there were rabbits on 271 holdings. Thirty-three of these were badly affected but killing was only proceeding on 22. Inspector Edwards of Hay commented that 'the rabbit nuisance has wonderfully increased ... and kangaroos are increasing on the runs north of the Lachlan River'.⁴⁸ In short, too many landholders were not killing the pests and not all boards were co-operative. Those landholders who were trying to obey spread phosphorised grain or other poisons, employed men to fumigate burrows and dig them in, and set dogs to drive kangaroos and rabbits into killing yards. The Deniliquin

47 NSWV&P, 1881, III, 849. Telegram to Chief Inspector 7 July 1881.

48 Ibid., Hay, 1 August 1881.

Sheep Board paid bonuses on 60,000 kangaroos and estimated that 100,000 had been killed. Around Balranald the total was 50,000 to 60,000 killed.⁴⁹ This indicated the scale of the problem and pointed to the expense of counter-measures.

The nineteenth century interest in natural science had made its mark on the thinking of many educated colonists and there was much speculation about why the numbers of marsupials had increased. Charles Campbell⁵⁰ saw a straight causal line linking the European decimation of the aboriginal population, the increase in the dingo population, the poisoning of dingoes and the massive increase in marsupials.⁵¹ While disputing the first factor, Sir John Robertson agreed that 'nature intended that the dogs should keep the kangaroos in moderate numbers'.⁵² Unfortunately nature had not planned for sheep stations. The native dog had few vocal defenders, so something else had to be done about the marsupials, as well as about the rabbits.

The amendment drawn up by E.A. Baker before his expulsion for corruption was presented by the new Secretary for Mines, Arthur Renwick. The important changes were that occupiers could be fined up to £50 for non-compliance;

49 NSWV&P, 1881, Report on increase of rabbits, p. 853.

50 See p. 104.

51 NSWPD, 1879-80; 3, 2987.

52 Ibid.

the voting qualification for board election was lowered from 100 to ten head of stock, although the graduated voting scale remained the same; the penalty for releasing rabbits anywhere in the colony was increased from a maximum of £10 to a minimum of that figure and a maximum of £100 or six months gaol; and a wider levy scale was set for the creation of the noxious animal destruction account to be held by each board.⁵³ Any holder of over ten cattle or 100 sheep would be obliged to pay up to 3d per head for large stock and ½d for sheep. Unstocked runs would be assessed at up to twice the annual rental.⁵⁴

The proposed amendments stimulated much more debate than the original act of 1880, but they could hardly be classed as a topic of burning concern for that session. Once again most speakers had pastoral interests and, despite the divisions foreshadowed in the earlier debate, there was no discernable block of anti-squatter opinion. George Loughnan, member for the Murrumbidgee, drew attention to this supposed unanimity of purpose:

He spoke as a squatter and from interested motives; but after the squatters came the free selectors, who - whatever might be thought of the squatters - were looked upon as the bone and sinew of the country. 55

53 The voting scale remained 10 to 500 head, 1 vote; 500 to 2,000 head, 2 votes; 2,000 to 5,000 head, 3 votes and over 5,000 head, 4 votes.

54 NSWPD, 1881, 6, 1774-5.

55 NSWPD, 1881, 5, 71. Adjournment debate.

It was on these grounds that Renwick rejected the suggestion that the minimum stock requirement for the levy should be raised, to spare small men.⁵⁶

The strongest divisions became apparent when Thomas Dangar, who held property on the Namoi River and was interested in the Darling River trade, tried to pass an amendment to include hares in the legislation. This was defeated 17 votes to 32 and a similar amendment soon after failed by 14 to 28.⁵⁷ George Cox, a leading sheep breeder near Mudgee, had many supporters when he objected that, 'If we destroy the few hares we had we should, when the native game was gone, have no objects of legitimate sport'.⁵⁸ Shooting hares was acceptable recreation for a country gentleman and his guests. After all, unlike rabbits, which, as sport, were socially rather suspect in England, hares were definitely 'game'.⁵⁹ As James Fletcher, the influential pioneer of trade unionism, mine manager and Secretary for Mines in 1886 pointed out:

The individuals who had introduced hares into the colony were, as a rule, proprietors of large estates ... the Lees, the Suttors, and the Kites - who owned nearly the whole property about Bathurst - had introduced hares; but they never complained about their properties being destroyed. 60

56 Ibid., 1812.

57 Ibid., 1813.

58 NSWPD, 1881, 2530.

59 See p. 21.

60 NSWPD, 1881, 1814.

This perception of the hare as quite a different kind of animal from the common rabbit was not just a matter of English tradition. Hares and rabbits are closely related but stories of interbreeding are doubted by zoologists and there is some evidence that hares do not thrive where there are many rabbits.⁶¹ Because of their less gregarious habits and greater speed and stamina hares have historically been regarded as worthy sporting targets, but the bland assumption that hares in Australia could not possibly follow the example of the rabbits and become a menace is a further instance of the strength of traditional impressions. Sir John Robertson claimed that the large owner's sport was the small owner's pest, but ties of sport and social position prevailed and hares did not become vermin in 1881.⁶² However by 1885 some pastures and stock protection boards were paying bounties of 2d to 1s.6d on hares.⁶³

At the heart of the amendment legislation lay the realization that faith in the capacity and good intentions of boards and landholders was not necessarily justified. There were some objections to the level of fines, on the grounds that large landholders would suffer because of repeated violations and small children might be gaoled for releasing pets, but no-one strongly disputed the new

61 H. Thompson and A. Worden, The Rabbit, London, 1956, p. 107.

62 NSWPD, 1881, 2530.

63 Report of the Stock and Brands Branch, Department of Mines, NSWV&P, 1885-86, VI, 1.

principle that individuals and boards had to be forced to comply.⁶⁴ Renwick bluntly told a Hunter River pastoralist, Archibald Jacob, who preferred the 1880 act, that 'The boards are found to be very reluctant to take the necessary action, but perhaps they will not have any hesitation instructing an inspector to do so'.⁶⁵ Whereas previously a recalcitrant board could be compelled to act only after the government received petitions from adjoining boards, under the amendments any five vermin levy payers in a district could direct an inspector to serve notice on an offender and thus set the system of compulsion in motion.

Apart from the sporting issue there were two other points of dispute. The Legislative Council passed amendments removing marsupials from the legislation and defining the level of reasonable expenditure by a landholder against pests as twice the amount of the vermin destruction rate paid. This was intended to protect those genuinely trying to clear badly infested properties from an endless series of fines, but in practice there was no check on the nature and effectiveness of the claimed expenditure. The base figure of twice the levy was also very low, particularly as few boards applied the maximum

64 NSWPD, 1881, 1775, 1811.

65 Ibid., 1812.

levy rate. The Assembly refused to confine the act to rabbits but accepted the latter amendment. Whereas William Forster, pastoralist member for Gundagai, regarded the inclusion of kangaroos as 'a tyranny', because there was little problem with them in coastal areas, Leopold de Salis, who resided in the neighbouring electorate, claimed that 'kangaroos and wallabies eat more grass than is consumed by sheep and if they are not got rid of their depredations and the overstocking of runs will destroy the pastures of the colony'.⁶⁶ Still in its first flush of enthusiasm for positive action against pests, and full of confidence in the potential of the western lands, the members probably thought that with the amended Pastures and Stock Protection Act they were going for the 'big kill'. Only Leopold de Salis, a shrewd pastoralist, well regarded by selectors as well as squatters, described the legislation accurately as 'a tinkering measure'.⁶⁷ He called for a complete government take-over of vermin eradication, a huge outlay and at least ten years for landholders to repay the government.

The Stock and Pastures Protection Acts did not work. The rabbits continued to advance. A new piece of legislation was planned for 1882 and although Parkes'

66 NSWPD, 1881, 2122. (Forster had defeated de Salis in an election in 1869. Perhaps this accounts for the extremely definite tone of the retort.)

67 Ibid.

government fell before it could be introduced the Rabbit Nuisance Act was passed the following year. Once again the speed of the official response must be emphasised because it contrasts markedly with the slowness of the initial reaction to the rabbit menace and with the high degree of scepticism still found in areas not directly affected. The city press had not yet taken up the anti-rabbit crusade, as the Sydney Morning Herald was to do in 1890 with its series 'In Rabbit Land', nor had parliament been flooded with petitions, as was to happen in 1887-88. One influential deputation of squatters from the south-west had seen the Minister for Mines in 1882 and petitions had been received from Corowa and Albury.⁶⁸ Another petition had been drawn up in Wentworth in October 1882, outlining the kind of clauses graziers wanted in the new act. However, this activity was a response to the fact that fresh legislation was already being prepared, not a cause of it. More usual was the response reported by the Milparinka rabbit inspector. He found traces of rabbits on every station in the area in 1883 but when asked whether this had alarmed the owners he replied: 'Some were and some pretended they were ... but they were keeping it quiet ... They did not like the expense of

68 NSWV&P, 1882, IV, 1509. Report of the Prevalence of Rabbits in New South Wales; NSWPD, 1883, 8, 289.

destroying the few rabbits that there were'.⁶⁹

Of course there was ample evidence from the reports of the Chief Inspector of Stock, Alexander Bruce, that the situation was getting worse. All the district inspectors had submitted grim forecasts and Bruce roundly condemned existing measures and urged the government to hurry and present its new bill. He ended his report with a plea that nicely balanced current gloom and the prospect of future relief:

It is not unusual to hear doubts expressed as to the possibility of ever being able to effectually check the spread of rabbits. But if a proper measure were speedily passed, and prompt action taken to enforce its provisions, there is no doubt their advance would be speedily stopped, and their eradication effected much sooner and much more easily than many supposed; for with a proper Act compulsion can be secured, and with compulsion simultaneous action, and that is an aid which has not as yet been obtained, and with the effect of which very few are fully acquainted. 70

However, a deteriorating situation does not necessarily elicit prompt counter-measures, particularly when large outlays are involved and strong sectional interests have to be placated. As has been shown, Victoria managed to ignore its problem for quite a long while, and, after all,

69 Report and Evidence of the Select Committee into the 1883 Rabbit Nuisance Act, NSWJLC, 1887 (2), XLII, Pt. 3, 506.

70 Rabbit Pest Return, 1882, p. 814.

it was only 15 months since the very first New South Wales rabbit act had been amended.

Part of the answer as to why the Stuart Ministry, which was not sworn in till 5 January 1883, made a new rabbit act one of its first concerns, probably lay in the unexpectedly steep rise in the cost of the Stock and Pastures Protection Act. In 1881 £15,000 was allowed in the estimates. The following year the sum was £30,000 and in 1883 it was expected that £50,000 would be needed and £15,000 under supplementary estimates.⁷¹ The contemplation of such large outlays no doubt inclined the authorities to look for ways of getting better results. If the boards continued to operate as they had done in 1881 and 1882 they would be entitled to increasingly large grants, even if they achieved little, but if economy had been the main consideration it could have been secured by simply reducing the subsidy. In fact it was acknowledged that the Rabbit Nuisance Act would involve greater expenditure. The 1883-84 budget allocated a total of £72,000 for it.⁷² Rather than short term economy, the main stimulus to the formulation of yet another act was probably the desire of the new ministry to pass a major land act which would break the hold of the squatters on the Riverina and western

71 NSWV&P, 1881, II, 210; 1882, IV, 188; NSWPD, 1883; 8, 15 (£35,000 under the Pastures Protection Act and £15,000 under supplementary estimates).

72 NSWV&P, 1883-84, II, 347. Included £10,550 for salaries and £45,000 for subsidies.

lands. These were the areas the rabbits were devouring. Closer settlement was supposed to increase the prosperity and revenue of the colony. This would not happen if rabbits remained unchecked. Regardless of expense the matter could not be ignored. Existing measures were costing a great deal of money and there seemed little to be gained from persisting with them. On the other hand, it would have been economically and politically foolhardy simply to opt out of the endeavour.

Whether rabbits could have pushed their way into parliamentary attention so frequently had they not been linked to the land question is a moot point, although Victorian experience suggests otherwise. In New South Wales the matter cannot be tested because the heart of the land reform battle and the centre of the rabbit problem corresponded in time and place. This left an indelible mark on nineteenth century New South Wales rabbit legislation and, indirectly, on all vermin legislation.

Joseph Abbott, Secretary for Mines under Stuart and Dibbs, introduced the second reading of the Rabbit Nuisance Act with an eight-page speech outlining the weaknesses of the existing system. He acknowledged the work done by his predecessor, Renwick, but rejected the bill he had been working on because it attempted to cover all vermin and would have involved the creation of new boards. Abbott argued that there was no time to prepare such a complex bill and that efforts should be concentrated on

dealing with rabbits as quickly as possible. He emphasised that drafting faults made the existing measures hard to enforce in the courts and that the boards had proved to be unsatisfactory administrators. Because they were elected by stockholders, 'they would be personally affected by stringently carrying out the law'.⁷³ Boards also failed to act simultaneously, which nullified the efforts of the diligent. This view tallied with that of Chief Inspector Bruce, who described the mechanism of local control as 'uncertain, tedious and costly',⁷⁴ and also with that of the editor of the Pastoral Times, a pro-squatter paper published in Deniliquin. While not condemning the principle of local control the Pastoral Times acknowledged that the practice had been poor.⁷⁵ Only the Wentworth Board had taxed to the full amount, despite the low level at which the vermin levy was set. Of the other badly infested districts Balranald had raised only one-fifth the possible amount and Menindee one-half.⁷⁶

The new legislation proposed to centralize control under a rabbit branch of the Mines Department. The branch would appoint inspectors, initiate prosecutions and control the financing of the system. Subject to the right of appeal large stockholders would be levied at a rate of up

73 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 287.

74 Prevalence of Rabbits, 1882, p. 814.

75 Pastoral Times, 8 October 1881.

76 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 288.

to 1½d per head and those holding over 500 sheep would pay up to ¼d per head. This money would be paid into a rabbit account out of which property holders would be reimbursed to a maximum of half the cost of approved eradication work. As in the previous acts there were penalties for non-compliance and for spreading the pest, but this time expenses incurred during compulsory clearance by the authorities became a first charge on the land.

The main clauses indicated the changes that had occurred in official thinking since the first foray into vermin control legislation. There was a logical progression from the assumption implicit in the 1880 act that the authorities had only to order property holders to clear the land and it would be done, to the recognition in 1881 that stronger powers of coercion and higher levels of reward were needed and hence to acceptance in 1883 that individuals must be given direct financial assistance to meet the heavy demands imposed by any eradication act. This meant that the funds for the scheme had to be drawn from a wider source than those directly plagued with rabbits. Abbott had actually suggested taking the major step of funding the new policy from consolidated revenue, leaving only some administrative costs to be met by local levies, but Riverina graziers had objected. They argued that they would have to go 'cap in hand' every year to ask for the allocation. This would mean a lack of security because as Abbott said, 'the evil might at some time necessitate a vote of £100,000,

and I think the House would hesitate before voting such a sum'.⁷⁷ A motion to test the feeling of the House on the subject revealed substantial agreement.⁷⁸ The suspicion was justified but the alternate arrangements still proved inadequate. Although it was supposed to be completely self-supporting through the vermin levy, there was provision for special appropriations from consolidated revenue to make up any shortage in the rabbit account due to heavy subsidy demands. It was assumed that these would be repaid when there was a credit balance in the account.⁷⁹ No-one foresaw the growing demands that would be made of the account.

Apart from the financial innovations the most striking feature of the new proposals was the willingness of the Minister to look beyond the precedents of earlier legislation to try to find a specific counter-measure. Abbott was particularly impressed by the New Zealand scheme. Unfortunately the New Zealand act had been in force only one year and, as squatters pointed out, New Zealand graziers enjoyed greater security of tenure than their New South Wales counterparts. However, awareness of how New Zealand was coping with its serious problem was a sign of a broadening of official concern about rabbits that was

77. NSWPD, 1883, 8, 689; SMH, 13 February 1883.

78. NSWPD, 1883, 8, 700.

79. 45 Vic. No. 19, sec. 45.

expressed also in a host of wide-ranging investigations promoted by various government departments from this time onwards. In 1880 there had been little interest shown in Victorian and South Australian experiences, let alone the reactions of those further afield.

Within parliament the same main points of debate emerged as in 1880 and 1881. Was centralization better than local control? Was there a case for allowing some people to keep rabbits? Should all landholders, large and small, leasehold or freehold, rabbit infested or rabbit free, be compelled to pay for rabbit eradication? Interestingly, the first of these issues, the nature of the controlling body, aroused the least disagreement. Never again would a New South Wales government be able to introduce a centralized system to handle a rural problem with so little opposition. Thus the Rabbit Nuisance Act became a turning point in New South Wales vermin legislation. Because it was considered to have failed disastrously it reinforced the tendency in New South Wales to favour local administration of rural matters.

Those who opposed a total ban on the keeping of live rabbits waged a far stronger campaign than the opponents of centralization. Early in the debate the Post Master General, William Trickett, member for Paddington and a very articulate lawyer, sponsored two amendments to moderate the bill. He claimed that Abbott's provisions would 'extirpate

every rabbit in New South Wales, which he ventured to think was not the intention of the committee'.⁸⁰ The House voted 28 to 25 to let people keep caged rabbits and shortly afterwards voted 34 to 15 to allow this without an inspector's permission.⁸¹ Much argument followed because it was claimed that many members had been confused and had voted in error. Abbott himself voted in support of the first amendment. The cantankerous stock and station agent, John McElhone, representative for the Upper Hunter, and the even more unruly Adolphus George Taylor of Mudgee, who, in a display of vituperative larrikinism, challenged each other to resign later that month, and were promptly re-elected by their constituencies,⁸² were for once in agreement declaring that there was no harm in a few caged rabbits. Pastoralist member for the Hume, William Lyne, who consistently supported the viewpoint of selectors,⁸³ was of the same opinion. Charles Campbell persisted in the belief he had expressed in 1880 that in 'safe areas' rabbits should not be banned and that they might even be bred for food.⁸⁴ The argument was carried on outside parliament by the Poultry, Pigeon and Canary Society, which

80 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 320.

81 Ibid.

82 Pastoral Times, 3 March 1883.

83 G.L. Buxton, The Riverina 1861-1891 - An Australian Regional Study, Melbourne, 1967, p.279.

84 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 1037. See also p.104.

pleaded the cause of the breeder of fancy rabbits in the Sydney Morning Herald: 'is it in justice to be advanced that, because other people do not sympathise with his hobby, and that hobby is not pernicious, he is to be persecuted? Are minorities to be crushed out altogether?'⁸⁵ The editor remained unimpressed, replying coolly that 'To cumber up the Act with exceptional clauses to meet so few cases is hardly desirable ... [and] would lead to all sorts of quibbling and expense'.⁸⁶ Opponents of the amendments organized vigorously behind-the-scenes and converted Abbott to their more extreme position. In the absence of McElhone, who had threatened to stonewall the debate if a total prohibition was introduced, another amendment was put, and this time the House voted 53 to 12 to ban all keeping of rabbits.⁸⁷

These details are trivial in themselves but they indicate the long history of the commercial interest in rabbits, and more importantly, the difficulty of sorting out any socially definable interest groups at this stage of the rabbit debate. Leopold de Salis was quite sure that the pressure for the legislation came from a group of 'Victorian large landholders, people who had everything ready to absorb three-quarters of the fund, and who could lose nothing by

85 SMH, 12 March 1883; 19 March 1883.

86 Ibid., 14 March 1883.

87 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 818-19.

this legislation'.⁸⁸ While not denying that these men were actively fighting the rabbit plague he considered that they were merely 'half colonists', and he thought it unfair that they should benefit more than those who only held land in New South Wales.⁸⁹ De Salis knew that, despite popular rumour, many were not squatters, and so, implicitly, did McElhone, who was an unlikely ally for the well respected de Salis. McElhone frequently saw grasping squatter hands dipping into the public purse, but even his biased eyes recognized that support for the Rabbit Nuisance Act was not confined to that narrow group. However, he interpreted what he saw in the light of his prejudices and concluded that 'it was a dangerous thing for people to come here to legislate in their own interests. There were in the House squatters' agents who advocated the interests of the squatters more consistently than did the squatters themselves'.⁹⁰ Joseph Abbott, whose family owned extensive property in the rabbit-free Hunter River district, admitted that his opinions about rabbits had hardened the more he learned. He had decided to support the banning of all rabbits and had already imported mongooses and begun releasing them.⁹¹

88 Ibid., 996.

89 SMH, 19 March 1883.

90 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 319.

91 See p. 174.

When it came time to count heads for crucial amendments Edward Combes, who frequently reminded members he had tried and failed to establish rabbits on his property, drew attention to the absence of the representatives of the rural groups most affected by the legislation and another time noted that there was not even a quorum present.⁹² Abbott claimed that country members had seen the amendments and indicated their support.⁹³ Part of the committee stage was conducted late at night after private members' business had been discussed, but presumably if there had been a danger of a non-rural, or sectional rural group obstructing the legislation more representatives of rabbit infested districts would have attended. Undoubtedly much of the support for the measure came from the Murray, Riverina and Darling seats, but all the faction leaders of the period, Parkes, Robertson, Farnell, Stuart, Dibbs and Jennings supported it. On the whole they said little or nothing: Parkes' one contribution was a terse statement to the effect that importing mongooses was a waste of time because their only bloodthirsty impulses were towards reptiles.⁹⁴ However, none spoke against its main principles.

Even the discussion of financial clauses revealed

92 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 695; SMH, 19 March 1883.

93 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 696.

94 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 821.

only hints of the sectional political overtones one might have expected from a parliament in the midst of major land reform proposals. Abbott accepted two important amendments in the Assembly. The maximum reimbursement was raised to three-quarters of total expenditure and the starting point for levy payment was doubled to 200 large stock or 1,000 sheep.⁹⁵ The first change was passed without discussion or vote but the second prompted considerable interest. Although the man who proposed it, Frederick Humphrey, a wealthy merchant and owner of a Queensland station, explained the change as an administrative convenience, to avoid having to do too much paper work for a small return, it was immediately recognized as a way of reducing the burden on small landholders, particularly selectors. A number of members of the Legislative Council spoke against setting a base level, arguing that, as all would benefit, all should pay. William Dalley, who was responsible for the legislation in the Council, warned that insistence on cancelling the exemptions might defeat the whole measure: 'That amendment is just the kind of amendment which would be resented in the Legislative Assembly'.⁹⁶ He claimed that it would be held to constitute an interference in basic money matters and would contravene an established principle that small owners were spared such imposts, for instance, under the Scab Acts and the Pastures and Stock Protection Act.

95 Ibid., 697.

96 Ibid., 994.

The matter was not pursued.

The best reasoned attack on the legislation again came from Leopold de Salis. He was anxious for an effective measure to be introduced but had many doubts about the Rabbit Nuisance Act. He thought the burden of costs was too high and should be shared by agricultural and metropolitan areas, and he pointed out that salaries and administrative expenses would swallow much of the money raised by the levy, leaving little to reimburse landholders.⁹⁷ He urged parliament to delay or to agree to review the act in 1886. Dalley accepted this amendment because Abbott had intimated that he would not object,⁹⁸ but in fact the Legislative Assembly rejected it. Although the Rabbit Nuisance Act was pushed through quickly because of the desire to pass the Land Act, it was not expected to be a stop-gap measure. Nor, despite its faults, was it the product of lack of thought. Drafting had begun under Renwick, attention had been paid to experiences outside New South Wales and new approaches to the key problems of administration and finance had been made. The government also took prompt steps to enforce the new system.

97 SMH, 9 March 1883; 19 March 1883.

98 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 1038.

CHAPTER 5

An Attempt at Centralized Rabbit Control,
1883-1888

According to the Australasian, which had a large circulation in the Riverina and a special section on affairs affecting that region, the stock branch of the Mines Department showed admirable determination to administer the rabbit act vigorously.¹ Sheep inspectors and forest rangers were appointed as rabbit inspectors but as only 14 were in infested districts 25 new appointments were immediately made. The Blue Books reveal that most of the minor appointees were new to the public service. Salaries were high. Ordinary inspectors received £300 p.a. as compared with the £200 of forest rangers and £250 to £350 for sheep inspectors. When the act fell into discredit high staff and salary levels were cited as examples of needless extravagance on the part of the central authority, but rabbit inspectors were expected to work hard. The areas were large and the paper-work was onerous. This latter fact may help account for the rapid turnover of staff and the number of dismissals. By 1888 few of the staff listed in the rabbit branch had

1 Australasian, 12 May 1883, p. 601.

been employed in 1884.² Of course some men took on this kind of job because their family properties were financially embarrassed. Orwell Patterson, son of the wealthy pastoralist John Hunter Patterson, made Tapio Station profitable only to lose it when the bank decided to sell. Because the bank reneged on its promise to give him another position as manager, he had to work for the Hay Rabbit Board till something else turned up.³ This was not an unusual situation.

The authorities were well aware of the possible abuses of the new system and seem to have tried to avoid them. Abbott appointed an experienced inspector, J.C.W. Crommelin, as Chief Superintending Inspector, under Alexander Bruce. Crommelin had been a sheep inspector since 1876. Both men opposed the idea of straight bounty payments. Claimants under the act had to submit details of what they intended to do, fourteen days in advance, and afterwards give details of the wages and capital costs involved. It was hoped that this would prevent the unscrupulous claiming for all labour costs involved in running a property. The vouchers were checked and the

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- 2 All information on salaries and staff numbers is taken from the Blue Books and the State Civil Service lists. At its peak the Rabbit Branch employed 54 staff. In that year, 1887-88, about 3,000 men were engaged solely in the work of rabbit extermination.
PR, 17 April 1895, p. 82 (Speech by J. Carruthers, Minister for Lands).
- 3 J.O. Randell, Pastoral Pattersons, Melbourne, 1977, p. 172.

inspector was not obliged to recommend the full refund.⁴ However, their good intentions were soon thwarted by the sheer bulk of paperwork and the size of each district. The government's policy was first modified and then destroyed by the inadequacies of the administrative system on which the scheme relied. There were grave flaws in the underlying principles which hindsight suggests would have eventually led to its reappraisal and probably its rejection but these were not the reasons why the 1883 act was soon so thoroughly discredited.

As early as March 1884 pastoralists were complaining that inspectors could not keep up with the flood of applications for subsidy payments⁵ and the conference of rabbit inspectors which met at Wentworth in February decided that payment for scalps was the most practical way of proceeding with rabbit eradication.⁶ The inspectors did not report their arguments but the perennial complaints in the stock inspectors' reports about the difficulties of overseeing work done on the stations suggest a likely reason. Fencing, fumigation, ploughing in of warrens and the spreading of poison could not be checked effectively simply by examining a few receipts. Yet each inspector was responsible for about 250 square miles of territory.

4 Regulations relating to the Rabbit Nuisance Act, NSWJLC, 1883 (2), Pt. 1, 167; 1883-84, Pt. 11, 1093.

5 Australasian, 29 March 1884. A meeting at Scott's Hotel, Melbourne.

6 SMH, 9 February 1884; Australasian, 16 February 1884.

Where control measures were non-existent the inspector could send in his own gangs and then sue for recovery of the cost. The annual reports indicate that the department would like to have done more of this, but there was no guarantee that the courts would or could force property holders, who were usually already heavily in debt, to repay the full amount.⁷ Where an occupier had made some motions towards rabbit elimination it was doubtful whether the courts would uphold official intervention, because it was difficult to define what was meant by 'reasonable effort'. In the view of over-worked inspectors scalps at least showed that something was being done, and many of them agreed with those pastoralists who believed that without the incentive of a bounty, employees would not exert themselves to kill the pest.

Rural arguments about the value of bounty payments are far from a dead issue, even in the 1970s. After the rabbit bounty was abolished bonus payments remained for other vermin, and the idea has been periodically revived ever since. It is easy to argue that such a system must fail, because trappers will naturally refuse to work themselves out of a lucrative business; but this is exactly what they did do in the case of the hairy-nosed wombat in the Riverina and the dingo throughout much of

7 Annual Reports, Stock and Brands Branch, Department of Mines, NSWV&P, 1883-84; 1885.

Victoria.⁸ There is no more reason to assume that self-interest prompted an inviolable conservationist ethic (or lack of it) among men employed to kill rabbits for scalp payments than there is to assume a similar restraint among whalers or any other hunters. Admittedly there is strong evidence that gangs who contracted to clear particular paddocks did leave some breeding stock when they had reduced the numbers to such a point that the daily return was no longer profitable. If they were not carefully watched they also transported pregnant does to clear areas, to promote business.⁹ However, ordinary station hands were still primarily wage earners who had to work in the area that the boss specified, regardless of the return. No doubt many became full-time rabbiters, following the lure of big money, but, until the depths of the 1890s depression, almost every station had its core of permanent employees, who could have been utilized to remedy the inadequacies of the transient gangs. Large stations were sometimes compelled to employ up to 100 or 150 rabbiters, but the essential follow-up work, such as fumigation and destruction of established warrens, regular laying of poison and the netting of remote waterholes, which could have been done by wage labour, seems to have been

8 Native animals and the bonus system are discussed in Chapter 8.

9 Select Committee on Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887, p. 484.

consistently neglected.¹⁰ One trapper who objected to the common claim that the spread of rabbits was encouraged by men like him wrote indignantly to the paper explaining that as soon as a gang's rabbit catch declined the occupier would transfer the men to another section.¹¹ Another rabbitier criticized a meeting of graziers at Tibora, which urged bonus payments instead of wages. He pointed out that all systems needed good supervision.¹²

It was not so much the nature of the system as the nature of the rabbit that made the bounty system fail. The rabbits bred too quickly. Had it been possible to retain the original policy, perhaps supplemented by a small, standard bounty payment, more progress might have been made, but that idea had to be abandoned within the first year, because the administration could not cope and the pastoralists would not co-operate. Much was made of the demoralizing effect of big money on rural labour. During the 1880s it was sometimes hard to get gangs of men, capable of working safely in the dry, remote areas of the colony, so payments were raised. It hurt hard-pressed pastoralists to see such men with buggies drawn by four horses.¹³ However, they themselves were not above cashing

10 Select Committee into Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887, p. 505, R. Strachan, Superintendent; p. 506, A. Bruce, Chief Inspector of Stock; p. 489, R. Officer, Union Mortgage and Agency Co., Melbourne.

11 Australasian, 1 March 1884, p. 283.

12 Town and Country Journal (Sydney), 17 May 1884, p.946.

13 NSWPD, 1887-88, 30, 2109-11; Select Committee into Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887, pp. 508-9.

in on the system by charging exorbitant amounts for rations and grazing.¹⁴ The discovery of valuable minerals in the far west of New South Wales in the early 1880s undoubtedly affected the labour market, but sometimes in contradictory ways. Station hands were drawn to Silverton in 1881 and Milparinka in 1883, but they were extremely hard fields on which to make a living and casual labour on the outback stations was almost the only way of acquiring a grub stake. Possibly some fossickers deliberately spread little breeding colonies of rabbits to provide food for wayfarers but in view of the general failure of control methods in the south west this was ultimately to be of little account. Even allowing for the effects of labour shortages it is hard to avoid the conclusion that most pastoralists did little to keep down the level of bonus payments. Every year from 1883 until 1892 the annual stock and brands branch reports referred to the need for a uniform, low set of vermin bounties, but there is no evidence that graziers made any effort to promote the plan. Their attitude in this regard is in marked contrast to the one they adopted over shearing rates in the 1890s.

In his pamphlet Rabbits and How to Deal with Them,¹⁵ Crommelin, the Chief Rabbit Inspector until his

14 Select Committee into Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887, p. 489. R. Officer, Manager of Murray Downs Station and one near Deliniquin for the Union Mortgage and Agency Co., Melbourne.

15 J.C.W. Crommelin, Rabbits and How to Deal With Them, Sydney, 1886.

forced resignation in 1886,¹⁶ advocated adoption of a comprehensive system. Landholders should set men to watch for approaching rabbits and start destroying possible harbours, such as brush fences and hollow logs. He reverted to his original position on the superiority of wages to bonus payments, but conceded that boundary riders should get a bonus when their areas were quite clear of rabbits. Whatever system of payment was used he was sure the essential factor was good supervision, and he argued that a badly infested run of 65,000 acres could be controlled by two camps of five men costing £130 p.a. each. This presumed a weekly wage of 10s. which was too low and did not allow for living expenses, equipment and poisons, but even when allowance is made for these charges there is still an enormous discrepancy between his estimates and the amounts paid to stations up to 1887.

In attacks on the Rabbit Nuisance Act a few examples of large subsidy payments generally not identified by name were frequently quoted. These suggested an horrific picture of stations being granted subsidies of well over £13,000 p.a.¹⁷ The table compiled in 1887, listing all infested runs, their expenditure, subsidies and rent gives a different picture.¹⁸

16 See p. 145.

17 NSWPD, 1887-88, 30, 2116.

18 The Rabbit Pest, Return of runs infested, their area, expenditure, subsidy and rent, NSWV&P, 1887-88, VIII, 973.

Two hundred and five properties were in the proclaimed area and of these 19 received over £1,000 each in subsidies for 1883-84. The top payment was £7,552.16s.1d. to Canally Station, Balranald. This was almost double the next highest payment, £4,050.9s.10d. to Avoca Station, Wentworth. Neither run ever again put in such a large claim and the size was due to the fact that both had begun expensive eradication work in 1883, before reimbursements were properly organized, so the 1884 payment was actually for two years. In 1886 only 15 properties received over £1,000. Teryawynia, Wilcannia got the largest amount, £4,977.72.0d., over £1,000 more than the next highest sum. In 1886 subsidy reimbursement totalled just under £72,000 as compared with over £128,000 for 1885. This figure was to increase considerably in 1887 to £179,393, but opposition to the act had hardened by 1886 if not before, and it was not mollified by the fall in payments in 1888 to £119,146.¹⁹ De Salis was correct when he claimed that men who held property in Victoria as well as in New South Wales received a large share of the subsidy. Of the 44 runs which received over £1,000 in any year between 1883 and 1887, 12 had owners who were also listed in the Victorian pastoral directories.²⁰ Some of the other runs

19 Return of Receipts and Expenditure Under the Rabbit Nuisance Act, NSWV&P, 1890, V, 328.

20 Australian Federal Pastoral Directory, 1889; Pastoral Possessions of New South Wales, 1889; A. Birch and D. Macmillan, Wealth and Progress: Studies in Australian Business History, Sydney 1967.

were held by private companies, finance houses or banks which also had Victorian connections. Nevertheless, the bulk of the money was widely distributed.

The Rabbit Nuisance Act was a very expensive piece of legislation, but it was well known that rabbits were a very expensive problem. Cost alone cannot account for the opposition the act rapidly aroused, because pastoralists were as hostile as anyone else although it looks as if they should have been very content because they were getting back three-quarters of their expenditure. The change in rural attitude also occurred very rapidly, before the total indebtedness of the scheme reached great heights.²¹

21 NSWV&P, 1890, 328. Receipts and Expenditure under the Rabbit Nuisance Act (to the nearest £).

Year	Levy £	Subsidy £	Fencing £	Other [*] £	Debt £
1883	35,900	-	-	490	
1884	44,757	59,223	-	25,606	
1885	37,444	128,207	-	31,347	
1886	40,024	71,912	5,194	38,601	
1887	41,173	179,393	9,732	21,469	
1888	47,941	119,146	11,323	26,783	
1889	46,901	73,028	13,164	12,120	
1890 (June)	33,531	481	2,624	1,609	
TOTAL	327,671	631,390	42,037	158,025	503,786

* Other included:

- a. administration
- b. Rodd Island experiments £8,798 (See p.194 ff.)
- c. Rabbiters wages and expenses, £62,655
- d. Conferences and legal expenses.

There is no entry indicating how much of the money spent on the rabbiting gangs was recouped from run holders.

The Australasian always took a dim view of bounty payments,²² but most of the graziers' letters it printed had favoured them. In 1883 the Minister seemed adamant. He ordered his department to issue a circular setting out the 'pernicious effect' of a bounty system, although faced with strong local feeling his inspectors already had their doubts.²³ These doubts were strengthened by a meeting of Riverina graziers in Melbourne in March 1884 which complained strongly at the delay in settling voucher claims and at the departmental insistence on wage rather than bounty payments to labourers. They considered that they were 'merely paying the men to sit down under any convenient bush and play euchre'.²⁴ Their voices helped convince the authorities that the original policy had to be changed. From 1885 it appears that reimbursements took the form of scalp payments, up to a maximum of 6d per head. It is hard to document this change because the regulations relating to the act which were published in 1885 and 1885-86 continued to refer to the forms whereby claims could be lodged for other kinds of eradication work and wage and equipment costs; nevertheless, in practice, ministerial discretion was exercised as to what was meant by the phrase 'to take all such steps as may be necessary',²⁵ and only bounty hunting met with approval. Harrie Wood, Under Secretary for Mines throughout the period, replied to

22 Australasian, 19 September 1885, p.490 - Editorial.

23 Ibid., 20 September 1883, p.409.

24 Ibid., 29 March 1884, pp. 410-11.

25 Rabbit Nuisance Act, clause 18.

a query on this point from a member of the Legislative Council Select Committee who had read the law and was mystified as to why the department seemed to operate under different rules: 'That is in the discretion of the Minister; he can give anything or nothing as he pleases. The Minister does not recognize the wages system. It was found to be terribly costly and difficult of supervision'.²⁶ By 1887 the department was well aware that any system based on sending men out to kill rabbits was bound to fail, but, as the head of the rabbit branch, Charles Taylor, pointed out, up till December 1886 bounties had been paid on 7,853,787 rabbits, which was many times more than had been killed under the wages system, and many other carcasses had probably not been found. He saw his inspectors as conducting a holding campaign: 'Until some better plan is suggested I do not see what else there is for it. The expenditure at present seems to have the effect of keeping the pest down to such an extent that they do not depreciate the grazing capabilities of the country, and that is about all'.²⁷ He was optimistic in his assessment but probably right in his decision. The rabbit branch had been unable to cope with the demands of the wage system and the pastoralists had helped destroy it. There was no going back to the original 1883 policy but if the western division was not to be left to the rabbits

26 Select Committee into Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887, p. 484.

27 Ibid., p. 475.

some action was necessary.

The Pastoral Times hinted at the basic cause of rural disaffection when it reported with confidence and approval a rumour that the Rabbit Nuisance Act was to be fundamentally changed: the wages system would be replaced by bounty payments and the whole system would be administered through the pastures and stock protection boards with the Mines Department retaining only the power to dismiss those who proved inefficient.²⁸ Two conferences arranged by the Minister in 1885 and 1886, which were attended by representatives of the sheep and pastures and stock boards, adopted the same line. They urged the government to return control of all matters relating to vermin to the local boards and to set up an advisory central committee.²⁹

Opinion within the department was divided on the subject. Alexander Bruce, Chief Inspector of Stock, thought that the local boards could successfully administer the act provided that the central board and the minister had strong powers of compulsion.³⁰ On the other hand, Harrie Wood, the Under-Secretary, was firmly against the idea because of the self interest displayed on previous

28 Pastoral Times, 19 July 1884. Only the first rumour proved to be accurate.

29 SMH, 6-7 October 1885; 16-18 June 1886.

30 Select Committee Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887, p. 494.

occasions: 'in one or two instances where we had to use the inspectors of stock as rabbit inspectors they were prevented from enforcing the act'.³¹ He was sure that the rabbits would increase very much more quickly than they have done. 'I think in all probability expenditure would be heavier'.³²

The details of changing policy during the late 1880s will be considered later, but it is important to notice the hostility aroused by the inspectors. This showed itself in all the relevant debates and in the newspapers I read. In part it might be considered a measure of the zeal of the new men. They made runholders do something about rabbits: the returns show a steady increase in the number of runholders in the infested region who began to spend money only during 1884 and 1885.³³ However, because lasting relief seldom resulted, many occupiers swiftly became disillusioned and decided that their money could be better spent. It is also apparent that many objected to taking instructions from Sydney and particularly from men they regarded as their inferiors. One landholder wrote about the 'arrogance of underlings' and claimed that 'there have been civil wars over less than the treatment we in the western district receive from

31 Ibid., p. 485.

32 Ibid.

33 The Rabbit Pest Return, 1887.

the Sydney Government'.³⁴ He had many supporters but also at least one opponent who wrote condemning squatters who resented direction: 'most probably he is one of those festive and ponderous individuals who seek to rule the destinies of a colony from the crack hotel of a neighbouring colony ... and wield a power which they abused in time gone past'.³⁵ Departmental notes on the qualities desired in a new superintending inspector suggest an awareness of this problem. The Officer-in-Charge noted of one favoured candidate: 'He is a gentleman in speech and manner, and this I consider a most important qualification in a superintending inspector'.³⁶

Despite an initially favourable response the rabbit branch soon slipped in rural esteem. Incidents that found their way into the parliamentary papers indicate that a zealous officer could find many hurdles placed in his way, and that the department was far from immune to pressure. In 1885 a Balranald storekeeper lodged a complaint against Crommelin, the senior man in the field, for alleged abuse and refusal to deal with his store.³⁷

34 Town and Country Journal (Sydney), 21 June 1884, p. 206. Similar comments appeared in the NSWPD, eg NSWPD, 1887, 2117 (Mr Wilson) 'I could bring well-founded cases in which the action of the inspector has exhibited the greatest oppression'.

35 Town and Country Journal (Sydney), 5 July 1884, p. 22.

36 Civil Service (appointment of Mr H.E. Vindin as Inspector of Rabbits), NSWV&P, 1885-86, II, 403.

37 NSWV&P, 1885-86, II, 173-80.

The rights and wrongs of the case can no longer be discerned. It developed from a disputed dog meat account and, despite widespread denials, it is clear that those under Crommelin were strongly advised not to trade with the firm responsible. The interesting point is that within a matter of months Crommelin had been sacked from the rabbit branch following two trivial charges.³⁸ He was suspended for having spent £2.19s.6d on going to Melbourne to buy a special poison trough (and cheaper poison) to conduct an experiment requested by the department. He had notified the department of his intention but had not waited for a reply. He was away two days and said that he had to do things so quickly because the dry season was due to break. As it was the rain began the day he started the experiment and spoiled it. Probably he was in error but he was the only experienced field officer in the entire branch. Following his suspension departmental attention was drawn to a letter written by Crommelin two years before, giving an inspector permission to hire two boys to clear a common. The boys were sons of an inspector, so presumably the man hiring them wanted to be sure that he was not going to get into trouble. Crommelin replied, 'Dear Charley, The whiskeys mix a man up so much that a sober man like your humble servant has no chance. Put on the youngsters, and do them over if they don't behave

38 Ibid., 389-97.

themselves'.³⁹ According to the Under-Secretary this was a 'coarse and filthy minute', but worse was to follow. The father of the boys had scrawled across the corner, 'Seconded, Bugger you'. Abbott expressed profound shock but in view of Crommelin's long service and previously unblemished record it was recommended that he should be demoted to the lowest rank of inspector at £50 p.a. less than anyone else. He resigned instead. In his own defence Crommelin wrote:

I have been nearly thirteen years in the Public Service, and I hold from Albury the highest character, both from the Lands Office and the Chief Inspector of Stock. I have ever fearlessly done my duty in spite of threats and all obstructions, and in consequence of being outspoken and insisting upon squatters killing their rabbits I have incurred in the Western District only their deadly enmity ... If I had worked in with and pleased them I should have been the best fellow in existence. 40

The man selected to replace him caused some adverse comment too. Harry Vindin was only 23 and the brother-in-law of the Minister. He was also inexperienced and charges of nepotism were made.⁴¹ By 1887 both the Lands and Mines Departments were under review and reorganization, a fact which did not add to public confidence.

Pastoral opposition to the working of the act was

39 Ibid., 393.

40 Ibid., 395.

41 NSWPD, 1885-86, 18, 680.

exacerbated by a series of outside events. The drought of 1884-85 helped reduce rabbit numbers on some runs and drove them onto others. Some runholders thus felt less need of the new act and almost all were financially embarrassed by its demands. Most rents in the western district had doubled after the 1884 Land Act, and some were increased far more.⁴² There was also the problem of deciding what to do with the resumed half of each run. In practice it tended to become a kind of no-man's land where rabbits bred unchecked unless government gangs were sent in. The owners of Kilfera Station near Ivanhoe took the advice of the manager, Richard Gardiner Casey, and sold out in 1883, just ahead of the main rabbit advance.⁴³ Casey had followed a policy of ploughing back profits to increase the capital value of the property and, on this occasion, his sense of timing was excellent. Because they sold before the worst of the rabbits, and before the drought and the 1884 Land Act, the owners made a very satisfactory profit. The next holder was not so fortunate. Rabbit eradication expenditure rose from £588 in 1883 to over £3,000 in the following year and had reached £4,856 by 1886.⁴⁴ On such a large, comparatively well established property this was not a crippling outlay, but it assumes ominous proportions when it is noted that the annual rent also rose from £390

42 Rabbit Pest Return, 1887.

43 Casey, Australian Father and Son, p. 65.

44 Rabbit Pest Return, 1887.

p.a. in 1883 to £3,003 in 1884, and half the area was resumed.⁴⁵ It was far easier for squatters to fight the Rabbit Nuisance Act than it was for them to resist the Land Act.

Just as enthusiasm for the introduction of the Rabbit Nuisance Act was linked with the demands for a new land bill, so disillusionment with the 1884 Land Act paralleled dissatisfaction with the rabbit legislation. Confidence in the potential of the western lands had been shaken by the drought: the rabbit legislation became a focus for general economic anxieties about the future, as well as for specific resentment of its impositions. The Wilcannia Pastures and Stock Protection Board members published a pamphlet in 1886 based on the views they had expressed at the rabbit conference in Sydney. They objected to the way other delegates had accepted the minister's direction and had refused to discuss the rent and land tenure questions: 'Rents and rabbits are both questions of annual outlay'.⁴⁶ In their view compulsion had brought many men 'to the verge of ruin'. They believed that self interest would be sufficient incentive for rabbit control if tenants had security of tenure.⁴⁷

The most important other issues affecting the outcome of the first venture into centralized vermin

45 Rabbit Pest Return, 1887.

46 Wilcannia Pastures and Stock Protection Board, The Land Act and the Rabbits, Sydney, 1886, p. 21.

47 Ibid., p. 29.

control were the political instability of the late 1880s and the budget difficulties experienced as a result of the drought and the fall in land revenue. The shifting alliances that accompanied the transition from the old faction politics to the new groupings linked to tariff policy were not conducive to the calm consideration of difficult problems, particularly when the area worst affected was so remote from Sydney. More importantly, the 1885 budget deficit of £1,052,614 which had caused Treasurer Dibbs grave anxiety had by 1886 reached the previously unheard of amount of over £2,000,000.⁴⁸ Rabbit legislation had proved alarmingly expensive. At a time of falling land revenue the large sums being spent on western properties were politically embarrassing.

The large staff of the rabbit branch was also a convenient target for Parkes' promised civil service retrenchments.⁴⁹ In 1888 responsibility for the rabbit problem was transferred to the Lands Department and the number of staff was cut drastically. By 1889 there were only three inspectors and seven temporary clerks clearing up the backlog of claims. In 1890 there were three inspectors, three senior men and a clerk. The number of

48 P. Loveday and A.W. Martin, Parliament, Factions and Parties: The First Thirty Years of Responsible in New South Wales, 1856-1889, Melbourne, 1966, p. 130, p. 133; P. Loveday, A.W. Martin and R.S. Parker (eds.), The Emergence of the Australian Party System, Sydney, 1977, p. 33.

49 Loveday and Martin, Parliament, Factions and Parties, p. 134.

active field inspectors rose briefly in 1892-93 to five, plus one senior inspector but fell again in 1894 to one inspector. From 1899 till the closing of the branch in 1904 two clerks conducted all business.⁵⁰

Between 1885 and the repeal of the Rabbit Nuisance Act in 1890 members did not lose sight of the problem, but the kind of legislation that would have satisfied everyone - effective but not expensive, compulsory but not coercive, locally administered but centrally controlled - could only have existed in the best of all possible worlds. The simple faith that had been expressed in the 1880 and 1881 Pastures and Stock Protection Acts had lost its adherents, but loss of faith had also weakened the will needed to take time from the more dramatic issues, such as tariff changes and federation, to discuss legislation that would inevitably antagonize influential groups and would probably either cost a great deal or fail to achieve much. A tour of the western division was arranged in mid-1885 for Abbott, the Minister of Mines, to show the area of the new mineral discoveries and also to prove how serious rabbits had become. No doubt his escort, Edward Quin, member for Wentworth and holder of the large western property, Tarella Station, followed the advice of a fellow Reform Club member:

50 N.S.W. Blue Books and Public Service Lists, 1883-1905.

When he talks about the loveliness of the climate ... whisper in his ear - rabbits. When he dilates on the valuable properties of saltbush, just mutter 'rabbits'. When he grows eloquent on the security of tenure, shout aloud 'rabbits', and when he goes into ecstasies over a patch of waving grass, scream in a higher key - 'Rabbits!' 51

The plan worked, at least to the extent that Abbott left office a more fervent hater of rabbits than he entered it, but it did not make it any easier to pass better counter-measures.⁵²

In December 1887 Francis Abigail, Parkes' Minister for Mines, introduced the second reading debate on a new rabbit bill. Its main function was to end the subsidy system but it was also intended to facilitate the erection of wire netting by reducing the legal problems. Abigail believed that 'it is only fair that those who have to deal with the pest at their own cost should be relieved of any interference after they fence in their runs',⁵³ meaning they would not be compelled to take any particular action to clear the land. This was one way of avoiding the disagreements surrounding the control and authority of inspectors, but it presumed that fences would be built and maintained to a satisfactory standard so that rabbits on one property could not menace another. The bill also implied that all stockholders would continue to pay the

51 Pastoral Times, 18 July 1885.

52 NSWPD, 1885-86, 30, 2111.

53 NSWPD, 1887-88, 30, 2111.

rabbit levy and it was unclear what was to become of the army of inspectors still at work, particularly in areas that had not been fenced. In brief, it was a confused piece of legislation and deserved its luke-warm reception from pastoralists and members of parliament. The crucial weakness was that, because it involved the matter of compensation for improvements, financial aid for the erection of wire netted fences was left for the promised land bill to determine. There was no guarantee such a bill would pass in the near future, or in the form promised. The government admitted that the rabbit bill had just been 'a feeler to ascertain the opinion of hon. members',⁵⁴ and it was promptly dropped.

According to the Pastoral Times the bill introduced in February 1888 by Thomas Garrett, Minister for Lands in the same government, was much better.⁵⁵ It was probably the result of Abigail's instructions to his senior men, because the rabbit branch had only just been transferred to the Lands Department, and, because of his drinking, Garrett was no longer an effective Minister.⁵⁶ The proposal was to divide the colony into districts corresponding to the land districts. The land boards would be responsible for administration and there would be a central board to advise

54 Ibid., 2124.

55 Pastoral Times, 26 May 1888. Details were discussed 3 June 1888, 16 June 1888.

56 ADB, IV, 235.

the minister. Once a district was proclaimed infested, fencing would be compulsory and the government would advance up to £25 per mile at 4% on first mortgage security. Once again the matter of compensation for improvements to pastoral leases was left for the long promised land bill. It was the government's explicit intention that the rabbit legislation should be dependent on the land bill then under debate and this hampered its chances of passing. Once again the bill was stopped by prorogation. Two similar bills were drafted in 1889 but neither was printed before the end of the session.⁵⁷

Draft bills were not the only form of political activity generated by the failure of the Rabbit Nuisance Act. As so often happens when action is demanded and no course looks appealing, the governments turned to select committees, departmental reports and even a massive royal commission.⁵⁸ John Neild moved to appoint a select committee to investigate the Rabbit Nuisance Act in February 1886, but he was a new member and failed to follow the proper procedure.⁵⁹ His second attempt in April of the same year at least prompted a vigorous discussion, but despite his assurances that 'this is no party movement: I have not consulted with a single member of the House',⁶⁰ his

57 Consolidated Index, NSWPP.

58 Some of the information gathered by the royal commission was referred to in the previous chapter but a discussion of the investigation will be found in Chapter 6.

59 NSWPD, 1885-86, 18, 679.

60 NSWPD, 1885-86, 19, 1140.

suggestions as to members did not meet with approval and there had been no action by the end of the session. It was not until 30 March 1887 that a select committee was formed, and it was at the instigation of the Legislative Council, not the Assembly.⁶¹

The committee was set up by squatters. Of the nineteen witnesses two represented large agricultural finance companies, ten held or managed large runs, six had experience of administering the act (as Minister, civil servant or inspector) and one was a member of the committee. Not even the senior administrators in the Mines Department argued for the retention of the act, and the former Minister, Abbott, said he had swung round to favour full local control because, unlike in 1881, 'the pastoral boards realise the necessity of working for their own benefit'.⁶² No doubt it is easier to be trusting when you are no longer responsible for the outcome. Despite its narrow composition the committee's findings were probably a good indication of opinion in the worst affected areas. The report tallied exactly with the recommendation of the two big pastoral conferences, October 1885 and May 1886, which had favoured assistance for fencing, decentralized administration and investigation of all possible methods of control.⁶³

61 Select Committee into the Rabbit Nuisance Act, 1887.

62 Ibid., 492.

63 See p. 142.

Because the whole issue of rabbits in the late 1880s has been buried in the history books under the turmoil associated with land legislation, free trade debates and federation, it is easy to under-estimate the strength of feeling generated and the scope of the discussion which occurred. Almost every town in the north west of the colony had a succession of public meetings; the pastures and stock protection boards made loud representations through their annual conferences; and the Australasian Stock Conference, held in Sydney in October 1886, which was attended by senior public servants responsible for stock in New Zealand and all the Australian colonies, except Western Australia, devoted much of its time to rabbits.⁶⁴

Whereas in 1880 the government was in advance of public opinion, instructing its inspectors to send out lists of questions, and framing legislation before there was much public demand for it, by the end of the decade the incentive for new measures was coming from the rural electorate, not from the front benches, regardless of which faction occupied them. The concerted opposition shown to the system of inspection in New South Wales makes an interesting contrast to the situation William Oliver has described in New Zealand. There it seems that the rabbit control programme led to a growth in the power and number of inspectors regardless of the controlling authority.⁶⁵

64 SMH, 11 July 1885; 24 March 1887; Australasian Stock Conference 1886, NSWV&P, 1885-86, VI, 21.

65 W.H. Oliver, Towards a New History, University of Otago, 1971, pp. 16-17.

Oliver has tentatively suggested that the lack of New Zealand opposition to the growing army of inspectors is an indication that the pioneer stereotype is false, that men on the limits of settlement wanted 'betterment, not independence, more not less civilization'.⁶⁶ The New South Wales reaction also contrasts with that of Victoria.⁶⁷ Rabbit inspectors were not the only rural inspectors in New South Wales and the evidence is too slight and contradictory to support any sweeping conclusions, but the New South Wales experience during the 1880s clearly indicates how the initiative for legislation can fluctuate over a very short period.

Legislation itself helps change perceptions, not just by what it does but also by the way it provides a focus for other resentments. Later legislation becomes a response to the new way of seeing things as well as a reaction against the specific details of earlier acts. New South Wales experimented at a bad time with centralized rabbit eradication. Whether northern pastoralists were more individualistic than their Victorian relatives seems doubtful: after all, they belonged to an intermarrying, closely connected segment of society. Probably because the larger state had tried to do much more than Victoria the disappointment and reaction were proportionally greater.

66 Ibid., p. 19.

67 See Chapter 2.

The swing against centralized control was also strengthened by the apparently more successful record of the stock and pastures boards after 1883. Kangaroos and dingoes simply do not breed like rabbits, and whatever farmers may say, eagle hawks and crows cause insignificant damage compared to rabbits.⁶⁸ So the narrow, sectional organization had a good opportunity to refurbish its image and by the end of the decade many people were prepared to support its claim that rabbit control should be returned to local hands. As has been pointed out, because of the failure of local government initiatives in New South Wales, there were few other local contenders for control, although the 1884 Land Act had set up land boards and courts, and during his last two years of office Parkes attempted three times to pass a District Government Bill.⁶⁹

The problems arising from this situation were well appreciated by the ministers responsible for vermin legislation. The clamour for a new act was increasing and the £500,000 debt left by the last experiment was a good reason for an economy-minded government to heed the calls for local control. On the other hand, the pastures and stock boards were considered bastions of the squattocracy, and it would be a strange move to increase their authority

68 See Chapter 7.

69 E.A. Larcombe, The Stabilization of Local Government in New South Wales, 1856-1906, Sydney, 1977, p. 262.

at the very time Parkes was striving to establish a more broadly-based system of local administration.⁷⁰ There was some sense behind the idea that the government would do well to wait till both the local government bill and the security of tenure and compensation for improvements clauses of the new land bill had been decided upon. Another reason for delay was that, although by an exercise of ministerial discretion, (such as had already been used to change from the salary to the bounty payment system) all subsidy payments ceased in 1888, the government continued to collect the rabbit levy, which amounted to about £40,000 p.a.⁷¹ Thus the government had sound reasons for delay, but one of the reasons for delay made pastoralists doubly anxious for action.

By 1890 western pastoralists were exerting great pressure on their representatives to get a rabbit bill passed, primarily to abolish the levy, but also to facilitate fencing. Fencing disputes could already be heard by the Land Courts, but only if both parties agreed.⁷² This placed a heavy burden of trust on a landholder who wanted to fence but did not have a written contract with his neighbours. In May 1890 Edward Dickens, the son of the novelist, who was the member for Wilcannia where he was a stock and station agent, moved an adjournment to discuss the problem.

70 Ibid., pp. 262-63.

71 NSWPD, 1890, 44, 792; 795.

72 Ibid., 778.

Dickens had managed the big Moomba Station and had been an inspector of runs in 1886, so he had first-hand knowledge of the situation. He was very critical of the tardiness of the Minister for Lands, James Brunker, in repealing the levy provisions of the 1883 Rabbit Nuisance Act, and he outlined in some detail the half promises and evasions which had taken the place of decisive action.⁷³

However, his own speech mentioned one of the basic problems confronting the minister: some pastoral tenants, particularly the larger ones, favoured compulsory fencing, but others, particularly the smaller ones, were opposed to it.⁷⁴ The 1889 Land Act had cleared the way for fencing legislation by extending the duration of pastoral leases and by classing fencing as an improvement for which compensation would have to be paid when the run was resumed.⁷⁵ Poor men with rich neighbours had good reason to dread the introduction of compulsory fencing and small tenants wishing to extend their runs were naturally wary of any plan that would enable the squatter to increase the amount of money he was entitled to receive when some of his land was taken up. The old squatter/selector division latent in the debates of the early 1880s had re-emerged, although it was far from clear-cut.

The member for Grenfell, George Greene, a large landowner in the central division, who pioneered the share

73 Ibid., 768-73.

74 Ibid., 772.

75 Ibid., 778.

farming movement in the colony, pointed out that in some cases it was the small men who took advantage of the large. Selectors who refused to contribute to the cost of fencing could turn around and demand more money when they wanted to sell out because the fence had increased the value of their property. Greene estimated that a 640 acre selector compelled to share the cost of netting existing fencing at a rate of £40 per mile would be liable for about £22.10s.0d.⁷⁶ However, such calculations ignored the additional expense incurred where there was no existing fence (which meant a total outlay of about £70 per mile) or where the selector was on the boundary line and thus became liable for the time and labour of putting up his share of a compulsory fence. They also ignored the basic problem of under-capitalized small farmers, namely their inability to get cash. It did not matter whether the actual sum was comparatively small or not, to men struggling to exist 'on tick' from one season to the next, it could still prove unobtainable.

The unpredictable larrikin, William Crick, admitted that although he was 'anti-squatter', this was one occasion when it seemed that selectors and squatters shared a genuine grievance.⁷⁷ The founder of the Free Settlers' Association in Wagga Wagga, James Gormly, agreed with Crick. He believed that the 1889 Land Act had been over-

76 Ibid., 779.

77 Ibid., 797.

generous to squatters and that they were 'acting now as they have acted on a hundred other occasions; after having received large concessions they come back to the House and say they want something more'.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he thought it was also apparent that 'pastoralists who go to great expense in procuring wire netting and erecting fences are working at a great disadvantage when their neighbours will not assist them'.⁷⁹ He favoured compulsory fencing but only in specified, badly infested areas. On the other hand, a supporter of the government, John Burns, who had proved himself to be an incompetent treasurer in 1887-89, opposed any change: 'where is the money to come from to recoup the government what they have advanced ... It is too much to expect the government to put forward a scheme when we find that all previous schemes have only resulted in a large expenditure'.⁸⁰ He was supported by the member for Morpeth, Myles McRae: 'unless they

[pastoralists] want to rob the people of this country the onus of eradicating the rabbit pest should fall upon the pastoralists'.⁸¹ A supporter of the legislation claimed that McRae's well-known, uncompromising hostility to pastoralists was a result of his experiences as a drover and not a reasonable response to the proposed measures.⁸²

78 Ibid., 779.

79 Ibid., 780.

80 Ibid., 781.

81 Ibid., 797.

82 NSWPD, 1890, 46, 2557.

Because no action followed, another adjournment debate was held in July at the instigation of Allan Lakeman, who held land under conditional purchase in the Hay district,⁸³ and was a member for Balranald. The speeches were very similar to those heard two months before. Once again attendance was poor,⁸⁴ but considering that no bill was under discussion and that attendance at the Land Act debates had also been low, this need not be taken to indicate that the matter was considered unimportant. There were many calls on a member's time and, as now, some topics were regarded as the concern of specialists.⁸⁵ Three hours into the adjournment Brunker announced that he would submit the question to the next Cabinet meeting and decide whether to introduce a bill that year. Other speakers were quick to see a connection between this move and the imminent introduction of the Crown Rents Bill: it might be another way of giving pastoral lessees further rent reductions.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Dibbs rose and promised Brunker that a rabbit bill would be regarded as a non-party issue and 'every assistance' would be given to its passage: 'The hon. member need not be modest, and blush like a maiden; we know that the subject is a difficult one'.⁸⁷

83 Annual Report Stocks and Brands Branch, Department of Mines, 1883, Appendix 2, Alphabetical return of holdings in the colony. NSWV&P, 1883-84, IV, 756 ff.

84 NSWPD, 1890, 46, 2552.

85 NSWPD, 1890, 50, 6574 - a comment by Bruce Smith on the committee stage of the 1890 Rabbit Act.

86 NSWPD, 1890, 46, 2553-54.

87 Ibid., 2555.

Brunker chose to get around most of the difficulties by presenting a bill which promised very little and by allowing even less time for discussion. The second reading debate began on Wednesday 17 December at 10.45 p.m. and the measure had to be in Legislative Council by the next day if it was to pass before the end of the session, which was set for Monday 22 December. If it lapsed it was unlikely to be re-introduced next year because of the pressure of work resulting from the long debates on federation although it might be possible to introduce some amendments. The debate in the Assembly went all through the night, ending at 8.50 a.m. on Thursday 18 December. Judging by the division lists, about 40 members were present at the beginning and 30 saw it through to the end. Considering the lateness of the debate and the fact that there had been confusion about when the bill was to be presented, it was a reasonable attendance.⁸⁸ Gormly claimed all country members were present,⁸⁹ and there was a sufficient range of speakers to provide the foreshadowed spread of arguments, but the numbers are too small to more than hint at developing, or pre-existing sectional allegiances.

The legislation repealed all sections of the Rabbit Nuisance Act and made the £500,000 rabbit fund debt

88 NSWPD, 1890, 50, 6510.

89 Ibid., 6497.

chargeable to consolidated revenue.⁹⁰ The minister was empowered to declare any district rabbit infested and in those areas rabbit-proof fencing became compulsory. Small selections could group together to form larger fencing areas and thus reduce costs. All matters of administration became the responsibility of the local land boards and the existing stock and land inspectors. Cases would be judged by the Land Court. As under the previous act all creatures listed as 'natural enemies' of the rabbit were protected, and inspectors could order occupiers to destroy rabbits on threat of a fine. The government could also gazette certain days for simultaneous vermin destruction throughout an area. The one startling innovation was the acknowledgement that unleased crown lands were the responsibility of the government and 'will have to contribute in the same manner as a private owner'.⁹¹ The same condition applied to land under the authority of the railway commissioners.

Although there were good points in the proposals a number of speakers were aware of serious weaknesses. There was no provision for financial aid to those compelled to fence, nor did the free-trade government suggest lifting the bounty on wire.⁹² The clause outlining

90 Ibid., 6487-90.

91 Ibid., 6488.

92 NSWPD, 1890, 46, 2543; 1890, 50, 6509, 6651.

government responsibility for unoccupied crown lands was ambiguous. Brunker accepted an amendment changing the word 'may' to 'shall' in a description of the government's responsibility for clearance of public lands, but he did so on the understanding that no amendment was offered to the clause which vaguely defined where the money was to come from.⁹³ In reply to a specific question from Gormly about the source from which the Minister expected to get money to finance fencing and vermin eradication on crown land, Brunker replied, 'Out of the general revenue, I suppose!'⁹⁴

Another worrying point was that although the Land Court was the first and final court for all cases, it had no power to enforce awards.⁹⁵ Civil litigation was the only remedy against defaulters and this could prove slow and costly. Disquiet was also expressed over the definition of 'rabbit proof fencing'. The wire netting standard was set at 36" high, 1.5/8" mesh, but there was a strong body of opinion that held this was too low and too

93 NSWPD, 1890, 50, 6505.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid., 6503. An amendment removed the subclause referring to further litigation but did not completely remove the possibility of such appeals, or increase the coercive powers of the Land Court.

large a hole.⁹⁶ As the 1888 royal commission into rabbits had discussed the mesh size of wire netting, without reaching a definite conclusion, Brunker had grounds for arguing that it was best to select the cheapest, but it was unfortunate that an amendment to allow boards to set a smaller mesh size was rejected.⁹⁷

Throughout the evening, regardless of the specific point under discussion, the debate kept returning to the effect any legislation would have on the land tenure situation and the ability of poor selectors to survive financially, but no simple faction division emerged. One pastoralist, William Alison, who owned two central division stations near Nyngan, argued that the act would be better administered by the pastures and stock boards.⁹⁸ This was also the view of the pro-selector William Lyne.⁹⁹ Another central division property owner, William A'Beckett, defended the record of the pastures and stock boards but thought that, in this instance, the land boards had a better claim.¹⁰⁰ The most vocal spokesman for the

96 Ibid., 6507.

97 Ibid., 6508. The wire netting recommendations of the royal commission will be discussed in Chapter 6.

98 Ibid., 6497.

99 Buxton, Riverina, p. 279.

100 NSWPD, 1890, 50, 6500.

selectors' interest, John Chanter, founder of the Kyneton Farmers' Union, Riverina selector and a member for Murray, rather surprisingly favoured the pastures and stock boards as the administering authority,¹⁰¹ and James Gormly did not seem to think it a particularly important point of dispute.¹⁰² On the other hand, the idea was vigorously resisted by George Cass, a member for the Bogan. He was a wine and spirit merchant and owner of several central division newspapers.¹⁰³ Charles Collins, representing the Namoi and also a prosperous rural merchant, sided with Cass.¹⁰⁴ This spread of opinion on a question that might have been expected to reveal a simple alignment is just one more indication of the complexity of the land question in the late nineteenth century.

On a practical question, such as administrative authority, it was not necessarily those who had the most direct experience who always held the most radical opinions, as illustrated by the differences between Chanter and Cass. However, this is not to say that the 1890 rabbit debate could be used to illustrate N.G. Butlin's suggestion that the selector-squatter conflict was possibly not of great importance in explaining rural policy in the late nineteenth

101 Ibid., 6496.

102 Ibid., 6499.

103 Ibid., 6499, 6501.

104 Ibid., 6496-98 (interjections).

century.¹⁰⁵ When the discussion got down to the basic fear of selectors that the squatters were manoeuvring to tighten their grasp on leasehold property (by investment in improvements) and to apply financial pressure to make selection more difficult (by increasing the capital required), a range of pro-selector opinion came together, including John Chanter, James Hayes, James Gormly, John Barnes, George Cass, Allan Lakeman, William Schey and William Willis.¹⁰⁶ It is impossible to tabulate the voting records of those involved in the debate in order to reveal a steady pro-selector coalition, because members drifted in and out of the Chamber (or fell asleep) so that different votes were recorded for similar amendments. Nevertheless, the men listed were the most outspoken representatives for what appears to have been a pro-selector group. By and large this assessment is confirmed by the third reading vote in the Assembly.

Thirteen men opposed passage of the act. Most of them had spoken against various clauses in the committee stage but many factors which go far beyond a simple squatter-selector designation combined to influence the vote. Most importantly, those voting against the legislation knew that it would pass. Opposition was a luxury they could

105 N.G. Butlin, Investment in Australian Economic Development, Cambridge, 1964, p. 89.

106 Chanter, Hayes, Gormly, Barnes are discussed in Buxton, Riverina, pp. 279-83. Cass, Lakeman and Willis have already been mentioned (see p.160ff). Schey was the member for Redfern, an active unionist who helped form the Railway and Tramway Employees' Association.

afford. No-one now expected a quick solution to rabbit problems. It was most unlikely that the new act would be an immediate success, whatever its long-range possibilities, and it might well be politically useful for a man to be able to point to a negative vote, provided that vote had not meant rejection of the act, retention of the levy and legal problems for those wishing to fence. The Sydney Morning Herald observed that although a new act was widely favoured there was much underlying dissension: 'The pressure of a common danger like the rabbits may, for the moment, induce them [squatters and selectors] to work together, but the impulse will not last long'.¹⁰⁷

Although the discussion inside and outside parliament was full of concern over the impact of rabbit legislation on the selectors, the issue was complicated by the lack of discrimination shown by the rabbits: they did not care who owned the pasture they ate. This helped blur the divisions between leaseholders and freeholders. In one infested seat, the Murray, the two selectors' representatives, John Chanter and Robert Barbour (who, incidentally, were both protectionists) voted differently.¹⁰⁸ Arthur 'firebrand' Rae,¹⁰⁹ that Laborite hater of squatters, supported the act, but his fellow member for the

107 SMH, 23 December 1890. Part of the series of articles 'In Rabbit Land' by a special correspondent who had been sent to the western division.

108 NSWPD, 1890, 50, 6575 - Division list.

109 Buxton, Riverina, p. 281.

Murrumbidgee, the leading selector spokesman, Gormly, opposed it.¹¹⁰

When the voting list for the third reading of the Rabbit Act is compared with the voting on clause 43 of the 1889 Land Act (which dealt with extension of pastoral leases as compensation for improvements) certain similarities emerge. There were five formal divisions over clause 43. Of the 13 men who voted against the Rabbit Act, only one, William Alison, who later became the first vice-president of the Pastoralists' Association, never voted against any aspect of clause 43.¹¹¹ William Crick was absent from several divisions in 1889, but apart from that he too voted for all clauses. Allen Lakeman, a selector holding the seat of Balranald, which still included many large pastoral leases, favoured 'fair compensation ... provided it does not lock up the lands',¹¹² but he was absent from the votes. In the final division on the compensation issue 19 men voted to reject the clause and of these seven were to vote against the Rabbit Act, eight were to accept it and four were not present.¹¹³

The most clear-cut evidence illustrating the relationship of the land tenure question to the rabbit legislation is the contrast between the Council and Assembly debates. Only five men spoke in the Legislative

110 NSWPD, 1890, 6575.

111 NSWPD, 1889, 39.

112 Ibid., 3002.

113 Ibid.

Council. Regret was expressed by Leopold de Salis and J. Smith that no financial aid for fencing had been provided, but the only amendment passed was one to reinstate the ban on keeping rabbits without permission.¹¹⁴ The entire proceedings in the Council only took up four pages in the Parliamentary Debates. Obviously in that section of parliament where the pastoralists were most strongly represented there were no objections to the principles of the act.

Within the short span of ten years New South Wales rabbit control policy had swung around almost a full circle, back to local administration and minimal government financial involvement. Yet despite the rapid changes and the close ties between land tenure legislation and the rabbit question, the various rabbit acts introduced from 1880 to 1890 deserve to be considered as among the most intense searches for a vermin policy ever tried in Australia. The acts were not just a series of ad hoc measures produced because other, more engrossing problems forced the authorities to pay some attention to vermin. New ideas on method, administration and finance were developed and tested, not usually very thoroughly but at least with much discussion, and not just as a corollary to other concerns.

No policy stands alone, separate from all other

114 NSWPD, 1890, 50, 6649-51.

policy considerations, but it was unfortunate that the area most affected by rabbits was also the area in which the economic and social tensions associated with the changes in land policy were strongest. Nor did it help that, because the rabbit menace was still remote from Sydney and the more populous parts of the colony, lack of first-hand experience sometimes reinforced the prejudices of those called on to evaluate new, expensive government initiatives. There were many men who believed that rabbits would never be a problem in the more settled regions. When time proved them wrong they looked back to the legislative precedents of the 1880s and drew lessons that made little allowance for the peculiar difficulties of forming policy for that particular region at that particular time.

CHAPTER 6

Experimenters and Policy Makers

The relationship between experiments in various methods of rabbit control and the framing of new legislation is complex. On the most basic level legislators could not be expected to encourage the introduction of methods about which they had never heard. However, adoption of new ideas was not necessarily based on the degree of testing they had received or even on the faith expressed in their effectiveness. As was shown in the last chapter, considerations of expense, legal precedents and social acceptability were often the most important factors influencing the passage of legislation. Nevertheless, between 1880 and 1890 every kind of method that has since been employed in Australia against rabbits was tried: poisoning and trapping, fumigation and digging out, natural enemies and biological control, barrier and private fencing. The development of these approaches to the problem reveals a great deal about contemporary attitudes and a little about the way a colony formed its policies. Again a detailed and extremely readable account of the kinds of methods used by landholders has been given by Rolls,¹ so I will not go into biological or technical detail, except where it is needed to illustrate

1 Rolls, They All Ran Wild, pp. 113-149.

attitudes and particular legislative decisions.

A far sighted optimist confronting failure after failure of control schemes in the 1880s might still have concluded that things could always have been worse: the first hope of the experimenters might have succeeded. If this had occurred Australia might have conquered the rabbit only to be faced with a plague of small carnivores. From the 1870s onwards the introduction of weasels, stoats, ferrets, mongooses and polecats was widely recommended. In rabbit infested areas domestic cats that went wild were protected from 1881 in New South Wales and 1884 in Victoria.² Joseph Abbott, responsible for the 1883 Rabbit Nuisance Act, released mongooses to help the new control measures³ and there were numerous private attempts to establish mongooses and ferrets.⁴ Cats were released by the dray-load.⁵ The significant point is that this was done without prior testing or serious thought about possible consequences, much in the same spirit as rabbits had been introduced. One might have expected that the rabbit experience would have made settlers cautious about bringing in new species, but such caution apparently ran counter to the popular scientific ideas of the

2 Stock and Pastures Protection Act (Amendment) 1881. Rabbit Nuisance Act 1883 and NSW Government Gazette 1 May 1883. Rabbit Act 1890. Pastures Protection Act 1902 and the Victorian Vermin Acts 1890, 1915.

3 NSWPD, 1883, 8, 821.

4 Select Committee on Rabbit Nuisance Act 1887, p. 480.

5 Rolls, They All Ran Wild, p. 116.

age. It was argued that rabbits became a pest because they had too few natural enemies: a primitive survival of the fittest idea. Looked at from this view point the logical step was to introduce the natural predators. Lest it be thought settlers were entirely blind to the fact that they were in a new environment it should be noted that they also conducted vociferous campaigns to protect the iguana as one of the few native predators that was not a sheep killer.⁶

Recent studies have shown there is validity in the claim that feral cats play an important role in stabilising the rabbit population in warrens, but this is only possible where numbers have already been reduced by other methods.⁷ What was almost totally lacking in the nineteenth century was awareness of the threat that such introductions posed to the native bird, animal and insect life and thus to the broader environment and indirectly to the pastoral and agricultural industries. Considering how many thousands of ferrets have been lost or deliberately released over the years Australia had a lucky escape, probably due to climatic factors more than the breeding habits of these animals.⁸ New Zealand was not so fortunate: the small English carnivores destroyed native birds and menaced

6 Australasian, 24 March 1883, p. 378. NSW Government Gazette, 1 May 1883.

7 ECOS.CSIRO Environmental Research, November 1979, p. 18.

8 In a typescript autobiographical account of life during the depression Tim Watson, now of Canberra, described rabbit hunting with ferrets in the Victorian Alps in 1933. At the end of the season he not only released his ferrets but also hung up strips of dried meat to help them through the winter.

lambs and poultry. Settlers were slow to appreciate what had really happened as distinct from what they believed ought to have occurred.

Some men wondered what the result would be if weasels and the like ate out the rabbits but very few expressed much concern and most dismissed the matter with the claim that 'man has always proved himself capable of dealing with carnivorous animals.'⁹ A Cooma farmer wrote that it would be unwise to introduce the larger carnivores but ferrets and polecats would do very well because poultry could be protected from them and, when they had done with the rabbits, the foxes would kill the surplus.¹⁰ The Bulletin gave the problem a little thought and produced a cartoon of the natural chain of predators, based on Indian experience: rabbit, mongoose, crocodile, missionary.¹¹ Of course not every one was convinced that predators could eliminate rabbits but Felix Mitchell of Walgett showed himself to be one of a small group of sceptics when he wrote:

Did the tigers in Saugor Island kill all the deer or other animals? Did any means squelch the tigers? Yes. God sent a tidal wave in October 1864 ... The thirty feet of water is a good cure for vermin ... but a counter pest is bosh.

9 PR, 1 May 1891, p. 476.

10 Australasian, 18 June 1887, p. 1164.

11 Bulletin, 18 August 1883, p. 15.

Belief in the natural enemy approach lasted well into the twentieth century. In 1916 Western Australia invited Sir David Hutchins, a noted British forester with experience in India and South Africa, to advise the government on forest policy including vermin control. He wrote: 'it does not seem a very hazardous proceeding to strengthen the Australian wild cats with some of their African cousins.'¹³ At least he added the rider that it might be as well to experiment first on an island. Whereas settlers in the 1880s had the excuse of inexperience it is hard to understand why the idea of natural enemies retained its attraction for another 30 or 40 years. It should have been obvious after the rabbit numbers recovered time and again from the decimating effects of drought that natural predators could not cope. As Francis Ratcliffe wrote in the classic description of his investigations into wind erosion and flying foxes, even under apparently perfect conditions following droughts, foxes, wild dogs, iguanas and crows failed to control let alone exterminate the remnants of the rabbit plague.¹⁴

Probably so many people clung to the idea of natural enemies because such a solution would be cheap and

12 Town and Country Journal, 9 July 1885, p. 958.

13 D. Hutchins, 'Control of the Rabbit Pest', Western Australian Forest Department Bulletin, 1916, p. 408.

14 F. Ratcliffe, Flying Fox and Drifting Sand, New York, 1938, p. 224.

the idea of nature striking a balance was a deeply held part of popular belief. It was easier to ignore the evidence than to adopt a new view of the way the natural environment operated. However ideas did change, if slowly. In 1921 the Pastoral Review went to the trouble of seeking expert advice on some proposals it received, particularly those involving the importation of South African animals. The director of the Port Elizabeth museum warned against the introduction of the meercat because it was swift and savage but recommended the polecat: 'It would, in time, eliminate the rabbit ... It is a slow mover and dogs can easily run it down and destroy it.'¹⁵ An even more drastic solution was suggested by the Perth Farmers and Settlers' Association which wrote to the Institute for Science and Industry (the forerunner to CSIR and CSIRO) in 1919 proposing the introduction of the carnivorous ant. The Institute's entomologist pointed out that 'this ant is a most formidable creature invading at times whole villages, compelling the people to leave. The ants take possession, destroying and carrying off all stores and food to their liking.'¹⁶ The Pastoral Review continued to receive many letters on the topic of natural predators but by the 1920s pastoral leadership had become rather more doubtful about massive new introductions. Inquiries were made in New Zealand about the effect of weasels and stoats on the

15 PR, 15 October 1921, p. 811. Editorial.

16 CSIROA, Annual Pest Correspondence File 102/A, 5 February 1919.

countryside. The replies were an unequivocal indictment of the scheme.¹⁷

At the start of the twentieth century state and federal authorities were far better informed and far more cautious than many spokesmen for the rural sector. In 1909 the commonwealth forbade importation of stoats and weasels because of the New Zealand experience¹⁸ and when in 1914 a South American aroused some interest by his proposal to solve the rabbit problem by introducing the Chilean 'quique' (a relation of the stoat) all the state premiers opposed the idea and attention was drawn not only to the danger to poultry but also to the effect on native fauna.¹⁹ Yet state protection of feral cats remained, illustrating again the difference between making a new ruling and changing an existing law to create a consistent policy.

During the 1880s the most widely used method of attack in New South Wales was trapping. Victorian experience had shown it was far more labour intensive and therefore more expensive than poisoning and many graziers blamed the panic it aroused among rabbits for further spreading the pest.²⁰

17 ANUA, E 256/126/8033, Graziers' Association, Package of letters from New Zealand about Colman Phillips, August 1922. The Institute made a thorough report on Colman Phillips' claims in 1923 at the government request. A.A. CRS. A 458/2. P.M. Dept. Correspondence files multi-number series, 2nd system.

18 Government Gazette, 22 May 1909.

19 A.A., CRS A2/230/1912-13. Correspondence Files, Annual Single number series.

20 See Chapter 2 and Royal Commission Into Rabbits 1888-89 pp. 65, 66, 86, 90, 94, 113.

However it had a number of advantages. When feed was plentiful rabbits were hard to poison and baits left lying around were a danger to stock. Deep pit-traps or funnel traps constructed in the angle of fences or on approaches to water could catch thousands of rabbits at a time. More importantly, when subsidy payments were based on scalp counts it was necessary to find the bodies. Poisoned rabbits often hid: trapped rabbits were easily located. This argument also told against the use of fumigation. Nevertheless, it became as obvious to New South Wales graziers as to their Victorian counterparts that while rabbits were free to move in and out of a district as weather, food numbers or vigorous counter-measures directed, the task of control was hopeless. The divide and try to rule principle had to be applied and calls for netted fences spread. At first the demand was for the government to erect long barrier fences to turn the grey tide. Soon the emphasis shifted to the provision of individual property fencing but the work on the long barriers continued, often long after the rabbits had swept past.

Barrier fencing remains a contentious issue in rural Australia to this day. It has been used against rabbits, dingoes, ticks, kangaroos and emus. Nowhere can its advocates claim it was completely successful and to many it rapidly became an object of ridicule. Henry Lawson described the Queensland border fence at Hungerford, north-west of Bourke, where the rabbits 'crack Noah's Ark rabbit

jokes about that fence, and burrow under and play leap-frog over it till they get tired.'²¹ However all states, with the exception of Tasmania and Victoria, persisted with the erection of barrier fences against rabbits until well into the twentieth century and some of the dingo and emu fences are still maintained. The scientific rights and wrongs of this policy are beyond the scope of a history thesis but the relationships between contemporary knowledge, public attitudes and government policy decisions are not. The question of dingo fencing will be considered in a later chapter²² but the reasons the New South Wales government expended large sums on barrier fences against rabbits are worth examination.

The first New South Wales barrier fences were begun in 1886. Building northwards from the Murray River and from Cockburn (west of Broken Hill) the 346 mile border fence was almost finished by 1890.²³ Tenders for the fence from Bourke to Narromine (on the Macquarie River) were called in 1887²⁴ and by 1889 the 207 miles had been completed as well as another 84 miles to Barrington on the Queensland border. By 1894 the line had been completed from Bourke to Dubbo and then south along the railway, using

21 H. Lawson, "Hungerford", Prose Works, Sydney 1935, Vol. 1, p. 26.

22 See Chapter 8, p. 260 ff.

23 T.A. Coghlan, Wealth and Progress of New South Wales, 1888-89, p. 323; 1889-90, p. 370. These state year books are the best source for barrier fencing statistics.

24 NSWPD, 1887, 25, 259.

existing wire fences for stringing netting, through Murrumburrah and Wagga Wagga to Corowa on the Murray, a total distance of 693 miles. In 1895 another fence was begun at joint expense with Queensland to run from Mungindi to Narrabri.²⁵ By 1898 there was a total of 1157 miles of government erected barrier fencing in New South Wales. The only extension to this total came in 1921 when the state took over part of the Queensland border fence as part of an anti-dingo campaign and had to agree to keep it rabbit proof to soothe the feelings of Queensland graziers.²⁶ There was consideration of a fence from Tweed Heads to Lismore in 1925 but it came to nothing.²⁷

The initial meeting about the Bourke fence had been attended by 81 run-holders at Cobar in March 1883.²⁸ They wanted an 180 mile fence costing about £100 per mile running from just north of Wilcannia on the Darling, east to the Macquarie River near Canonbar. The driving force was Archie Maxwell, a former Victorian grazier with personal experience of rabbits. The final meeting was held in June 1883 and, although those attending expressed strong sympathy for the idea, no decision was reached because of the cost.²⁹ It was decided to collect signatures on a petition seeking a government subsidy. As the rabbits

25 Wealth & Progress, 1895-96, p. 839. Summary of barrier fencing to that date.

26 Rolls, p. 123.

27 Steed, Rabbit Menace Inquiry, Report, Pt. 11.

28 Australasian, 21 April 1883, p. 505.

29 Ibid., 16 June 1883, p. 761.

moved northeast so did the debate about the barrier fence. In 1885 70 run-holders met at Bourke and requested government aid for a fence.³⁰ Both the 1885 and 1886 Sydney rabbit conferences favoured the construction of barriers.³¹

In contrast to the enormous amount of discussion that surrounded the rabbit acts barrier fencing projects were begun with very little debate, despite the outcry over other forms of expenditure under the Rabbit Nuisance Act and considerable scepticism about the effectiveness of long lines of fencing. When Abigail, the Minister for Mines, was asked whether he still thought that the Bourke fence was worth constructing, seeing that rabbits had been reported 40 miles beyond, he replied 'I cannot be held responsible for what is commonly reported. I am satisfied that the work will be a great public benefit and I propose to proceed with it.'³²

Work had begun before the 1887 Stock Branch investigation of effective mesh size and before the massive 1888-89 royal commission into all methods of control. As a result a number of different gauges of wire, heights and mesh sizes were used. The South Australian border fence was 1¼ inch mesh, 17 gauge and 42 inches high. It cost

30 Ibid., 12 September 1885, p. 493.

31 See Chapter 5. Also Australasian, 26 June 1886, p. 1212.

32 NSWPD, 1887-88, 30, 1983.

£37 per mile (or £76 erected). Narromine to Bourke was netted in the heavier 16 gauge wire, 48 inches high but with a larger 1½ inch mesh, which cost £48 per mile (£84 erected). The southern section of the line was 17 gauge, 1½ inch mesh and 42 inches high. It cost £31 per mile (£60 erected). The Railway Commissioners contracted with the Lands Department to maintain the wire netting on their fences.³³

The lack of investigation of the best mesh size, height and gauge and the lack of concern shown at criticism of the whole exercise illustrates the problem of trying to relate policy decisions to contemporary research. The reasons for building barrier fences remain obscure but there is no evidence that they were based on scientific investigations, although such investigations took place. Rolls sees the explanation for the construction of netted border fences in terms of a 'jealous parochialism':³⁴ New South Wales did not want to deal with South Australian rabbits. This line of argument seems to have influenced Queensland to build a border fence³⁵ and it may well be the correct one, but it cannot explain the eastern barrier fence. There is a marked lack of records, possibly because barrier fencing was also seen as simply part of the

33 Wealth and Progress, 1895-96, p. 839. The finished height of the fence was always six inches less than the width of the netting because of the need to bury the lower six inches to prevent rabbits burrowing underneath.

34 Rolls, p. 122.

35 Cameron, "Queensland rabbits".

accepted roads, railways and bridges syndrome whereby local members sought to prove their worthiness to represent a district by the amount of capital works they won for the area. The weakness of this argument is that the eastern fence crossed many electorates. The members differed in experience and influence but the actual building was not a disjointed project. Tenders were called by section but the work proceeded steadily, despite the expense and the sometimes enormous difficulties of construction.

Severe maintenance problems were obvious long before the fences were finished. Graziers and farmers refused to mend them, claiming that the government should do it, and drifting sand, animals, wind, fire, floods and corrosion soon began their destructive work.³⁶ Yet serious efforts were made to keep the fences rabbit proof. Boundary riders were appointed and many sections were rebuilt time and again. Even after the 1902 Pastures Protection Act made fencing and all rabbit control the responsibility of the pastures protection boards the state continued to pay the Railway Commissioners to maintain the netting along the railway lines. Between 1902 and 1918 this cost £13,414.³⁷ The payments were made despite the

36 Rolls, p. 123.

37 Wealth and Progress, 1920, p. 795.

admission of the Commissioners that the fence condition was only fair and that they doubted its worth.³⁸ In contrast to the huge sums spent under the Rabbit Nuisance Act Lands Department expenditure on rabbit control between 1890 and 1895 only came to £39,358, but of this £28,897 was spent on barrier fencing.³⁹

It is clear that the government of New South Wales saw some advantage in continuing the barrier fencing policy, perhaps not least because it was the most conspicuous policy available. In success or failure the fences were a visible sign that the government had tried to do something. In his local history of Condobolin, William Bayley noted that at the time the town was becoming concerned about rabbits, 1892, there was much public comment on the wagon loads of wire netting seen moving northwards. A few local men took up the idea of fencing and in 1897 there was a petition for government fencing assistance.⁴⁰

There are also a few anomalies in the fence building schemes that strengthen the idea that conspicuous effort was at least as important a motive as faith in the ultimate effectiveness of the barriers. The original proposal of the 1886 rabbit conference was for a fence from Barrigun (on the

38 Stead, *Rabbit Menace Inquiry*, p. 197.

39 Wealth and Progress, 1898-99, p. 713.

40 W. Bayley, Down the Lachlan Years Ago: History of Condobolin, Condobolin, 1965, p. 66.

Queensland border) south through Bourke, south-east to Nyngan (not Narromine) then south to Condobolin, Junee and Albury. According to disgruntled settlers in the north the Barrigun to Bourke section was initially deleted on the representation of a small group of self-constituted delegates of large central division holdings, presumably anxious for more rapid construction south of Bourke, and as a result the rabbits went round the northern end of the fence.⁴¹ It is probably more significant that the Bourke to Barrigun section posed by far the most difficult construction problems because of the rivers, the climate, the sand and the scrub. The diversion of the southern section of the fence to Narromine and then southwards was a more justifiable decision because it moved the barrier fence along to the railway line where there was existing wire fencing on which to hang the netting. Despite the complaints from the Condobolin area that they should have been protected there were already rabbits east of Wagga Wagga and Corowa, let alone around Junee and Albury.

The fencing projects may have had a subsidiary worth in the eyes of non-rural politicians in that they encouraged a new secondary industry. John Lysaght Pty. Ltd. had begun wire netting manufacture in New South Wales in the early 1880s. Despite the predominance of free trade ministries and the demands for cheaper netting from settlers

41 PR, 15 March 1892, p. 536.

there was a £3 per ton protective tariff till 1892, when Dibbs' Protectionist ministry reduced it to 30s. The duty was not finally dropped till 1896, whereas protectionist Victoria had repealed the duty in 1886. Although Lysaght wire was £1 to £3 per mile dearer than its British and German competitors, it was better quality, less tightly rolled and therefore easier to erect.⁴² On these grounds it continued to win New South Wales contracts, despite some freetrader scepticism, and the company sold its entire output in the colony.⁴³ Fence construction was also a source of employment in the lean years of the early 1890s.

The lack of strong opposition to expenditure on barrier fences from representatives of non-rural areas is in marked contrast to the response to schemes involving more direct aid to those afflicted with rabbits. There was something in this policy for everyone; from the western division grazier being eaten out by rabbits to the eastern settlers anxious to avoid them; from the rural labourers dismissed from the big rabbiting gangs to the supporters of secondary industry.

By the early 1890s it was obvious that barrier fences could not keep an area free from rabbits but this did not prove that they were useless. They broke the free flow of rabbits, provided the opportunity for large pit trap

42 C.B. Shedvin, "Rabbits and Industrial Development", Australian Economic History Review, 1970, Vol. 10, p. 34.

43 NSWV&P, 1887, (2), IV, 633. Wire Netting Tenders.

construction and served as starting points and often as the initiative for private fences. What was totally lacking in the barrier fencing policy was any attempt to test scientifically the efficiency of various types of fences or to weigh the benefits of this form of expenditure against the other possible forms. Victoria had swung around heavily towards government loans for private fence construction. New South Wales resisted similar demands from the rural electorate. Not even minimal aid was provided until 1899.⁴⁴ This omission made for an oddly unbalanced policy and further reduced the effectiveness of the long fences.

The main contact between policy makers and experimenters was in the area of vermin control by the introduction of diseases. The idea of killing rabbits by disease was as popular as the idea of introducing natural predators and for similar reasons. It would be cheap, require little labour and it was in line with popular conceptions of the way the natural environment operated. Some of the suggestions were horrific in their possible implications. In 1883 Anthony Willows, the New South Wales veterinary officer, put forward plans based on his experiments in 1874 with tuberculosis.⁴⁵ John Creed, who later became president of the New South Wales Medical Association and was a member

44 Private fence construction is discussed in the next chapter. The first Advances to Settlers Act was not specifically intended to help farmers build fences. It was primarily emergency relief but it may have provided minimal indirect assistance.

45 Australasian, 19 May 1883, p. 635. SMH, 31 March 1883.

for the Upper Hunter, was also very interested in the use of tuberculosis against rabbits.⁴⁶ Other scientists proposed use of syphilis or even anthrax.⁴⁷ The 1884 Conference of Rabbit Inspectors from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, which met in Wentworth discussed the general topic of disease introduction but decided to wait for the results of a Tasmanian investigation into an outbreak of tuberculosis in rabbits.⁴⁸ Many pastoralists also had schemes for encouraging the spread of diseases that they had heard afflicted European rabbits or that they thought they had observed among rabbits on their land. For instance, John Hunter Patterson applied to the Lands Department for permission to release 'a mange' among rabbits on his Riverina properties.⁴⁹ He was referred to the royal commission investigation and permission was refused.

Matters came to a head when Parkes suddenly offered a £25,000 reward for a solution to the rabbit problem.⁵⁰ There had been an earlier suggestion of a combined Victorian and New South Wales offer of £60,000 by William Dalley, a Sydney barrister, who, while he was acting Premier had been responsible for the presentation of the

46 Creed Papers, Rabbit Destruction 1883-89. ML, A692.

47 Australasian, 1 November 1884, p. 826.

48 Ibid., 16 February 1884, p. 217.
NSWV&P, 1883-84, IX, 275. Report on Diseases in Tasmanian Rabbits.

49 MUA, John Hunter Patterson, Correspondence, 1889, June - December.

50 Proclamation, Department of Mines, 31 August 1887.

Rabbit Nuisance Act in the Legislative Council, but it had not eventuated.⁵¹ Parkes' offer came without warning after Abigail had made it clear that there were going to be big cuts in spending under the Rabbit Nuisance Act.⁵² There was some complaint that members should have been consulted but the offer was justified on the grounds that £25,000 represented only one eighth of the Department of Mines' annual expenditure on rabbits.⁵³ Of course the rabbit account was already heavily in debt but an assured solution would have been well worth many times the reward, though whether the ministry would have shared this view had it been called upon to produce the cash was never put to the test.

The announcement prompted a flood of about 1,400 proposals, many from overseas. Most could be dismissed quickly as impractical but some raised high hopes. Three likely schemes from reputable authorities advocating the introduction of contagious diseases were referred to the Board of Health in early 1888. Louis Pasteur, founder of the famous French institute for microbiological research, suggested the spreading of chicken cholera germs, Drs Henry

51 Argus, 19 May 1885; Australasian, 30 May 1885, 4 July 1885. The 1886 Intercolonial Stock Conference also recommended that all colonies should offer bonuses for a successful remedy. NSWV&P, 1885-86, VI, 21.

52 NSWPD, 1887, 25, 375. Introduction to Rabbit Nuisance Act Amendment Bill.

53 NSWPD, 1887-88, 28, 365-6.

Ellis and Herbert Butcher favoured experiments with the so-called Tintinallogy disease present on John Reid's Wilcannia property, where Butcher lived, and Professor Archibald Watson of Adelaide University recommended the introduction of a German parasite which caused a skin disease similar to scab in sheep.⁵⁴

Preliminary investigation by the Board of Health consisted of sending the officer in charge of the rabbit branch, Henry Taylor, and the Chief Inspector of Stock, Alexander Bruce, as well as local rabbit inspectors to look at the rabbits held by Watson and Butcher and expert veterinary opinions were sought on the three schemes, although in all three cases little had yet been done beyond observing the progress of each disease among small groups of enclosed rabbits. The scientists were sceptical of the contagious potential against rabbits in the wild and were concerned about the effects of chicken cholera on poultry and wild birds and of the scab on stock. The staff of the rabbit branch were inclined to favour wider tests. They described the limited experiments that they had observed and the condition of the rabbits but were wary of trying to forecast what would happen on a larger, more natural scale of test. The board replied to the proposals in February 1888. It found all three studies very incomplete and inconclusive. There was either no evidence that the

54 NSWV&P, 1887-88, VIII, 955. Report of the Board of Health on Destruction of Rabbits by Means of Disease.

diseases would work under natural conditions or there was reason to fear that infection might spread to other creatures.

Rural pressure would not have let the matter rest there, as Pasteur's name in particular carried great weight, but the government had promised a detailed, expert investigation into all claims for the reward, so these three claims formed the largest section of the 1888-89 Royal Commission of Inquiry into Schemes for Extermination of Rabbits in Australia, known popularly as the Intercolonial Rabbit Commission. All the colonies and New Zealand were invited to nominate experienced persons to sit in association with the special representatives of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Only Western Australia declined. The official committee was composed of doctors, scientists, graziers and businessmen. Despite later criticism of the presumptuousness of a group of relatively unknown 'colonials' sitting in judgment on one of the great scientists of the century the members were very well chosen.⁵⁵ They had a wide range of relevant professional experience and a good knowledge of the Australian situation. As the age range of the group shows the members were not hide-bound old men. Some had yet to reach the peak of their careers. Others already had high reputations outside Australia. An annotated copy of the original preliminary report and

55 See Appendix.

correspondence between members, held by the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board, Melbourne, shows how seriously and thoroughly the investigation was approached. However, not only were its conclusions ultimately disputed but its operations soon ran into difficulties not altogether of its own making.

The investigation got off to a bad start. Pasteur had sent his nephew, Adrien Loir, and two scientists, Drs Germont and Hinds from the Institut Pasteur to conduct tests of chicken cholera on Rodd Island near Sydney. As a subsidiary project they were also to consult with the stock board about an outbreak of what was thought to be anthrax. The board was considering buying Pasteur's new anthrax vaccine. The Frenchmen were treated to a fine display of bureaucratic ineptitude, suspicion and sly dealing. Mail and samples from Pasteur to his assistants were delayed and opened.⁵⁶ A cable from Pasteur instructing his men to do no further work for the stock board until the chicken cholera investigation was completed was detained by Parkes for 36 days and then delivered with the terse comment on one corner 'Mislaidd. H.P.' Despite wide publicity given to these incidents by Creed the government gave no explanation beyond the unbelievable assertion that they were all due to oversights and accidents. The anthrax telegram was probably

56 Creed papers. Cuttings from the SMH and Daily Telegraph, particularly February and June 1889. The letters were cut open, not steamed, and no attempts were made to conceal the fact they had been opened, although it was denied they had been read.

delayed so that the stock branch could get more free advice to help it decide whether to pay Pasteur £38,000 for his discovery,⁵⁷ but why the other letters were opened remains a mystery. The French scientists were not easy men to work with. They were under strict instructions from their illustrious superior: 'We cannot modify the instructions which he has given us ... We can only make the experiments which we are authorized to make.'⁵⁸ They were determined not to be cheated of their reward through a premature revelation of their bacteriological techniques, but whether New South Wales officials were actually hoping to steal ideas or whether they were merely clumsily trying to find out if it was likely that the financially hard pressed government was going to have to disgorge £25,000 is an open question.

The commissioners' main difficulty emerged when they presented the French scientists with a schedule of experiments designed to test the spread of the disease in close quarters, its effect on domestic fowls, its effect on a range of wild birds and its lasting communicable quality. Initially Pasteur's representatives agreed to do this work in association with Dr Katz, Chief Expert Officer of the commission, but later instructions from Pasteur led them to

57 Stock Branch Report on Anthrax (Cumberland) Disease in Sheep and Cattle, NSWV&P, 1888-89, III, 649. The vaccine was effective but heat sensitive and two doses were needed. Pastoralists were financially hard pressed and refused to pay but the vaccine was later produced under licence.

58 Royal Commission into Rabbits, 1888-89, Report pp. XI-XII.

change their position and to refuse to do any of the broader, non-laboratory tests on the communicable nature of chicken cholera.⁵⁹ There was no doubt that, as Pasteur had observed in the small rabbit infested walled field of the Widow Pommery, ingested chicken cholera culture was a rabbit killer, but Australia was not a compact French garden.⁶⁰ Many poisons effectively killed rabbits, if the rabbits could be induced to eat them and if they retained their potency. The value of a disease would lie in its involuntary communicability from generation to generation, but there also lay its danger. It was these qualities that Pasteur's experiments failed to test. Pasteur wanted the final test to be conducted in a 500 acre, heavily rabbit infested enclosure. Every few days his men would spread fresh bacterial culture on suitable feed. As the commissioners said in their report, this would prove only that the culture was poisonous, not that it was a fatal contagious disease.⁶¹ Many years later a member of the commission, probably Quin, wrote anonymously about the refusal of large sectors of the public to accept that the investigation had been right to reject Pasteur's proposal. He pointed out that when some of these doubters conducted rather risky, amateurish tests in Queensland and New Zealand the results confirmed the commissioners' judgments.

59 Ibid., p. XIII.

60 Ibid., Evidence p. 194.

61 Ibid., Report, pp. XXII-XXIII.

He also reminded readers that Pasteur never made any attempt by experiment or statement to disprove or contravert the findings: 'He died loyal to the honour of science, but nobly disloyal to his "choléra des poules"'.⁶²

The commissioners also encountered a great deal of trouble in arranging tests of the so-called Tintinallogy disease. Tintinallogy was a station on the Darling between Menindee and Wilcannia. In 1887 291,000 rabbits had been killed there under the bonus system but shortly afterwards Dr Butcher, a graduate of King's College London, who was resident on the property and had been on the look-out for a spontaneous outbreak of disease, noticed many sick rabbits and received permission from the Mines Department to try to foster the infection on 500 acres which were almost cut off from the rest of the property by a bend of the Darling.⁶³ Butcher collaborated with a colleague, Ellis, in Sydney and in five or six months claimed to have wrought havoc among the local rabbits. The disease also appeared on other western stations. Argument centred on whether the sickness was related to poor feed (a result of drought and over grazing) and whether it could have a lasting impact. The commissioners wanted to release 50 infected rabbits into a large enclosure of healthy rabbits in another district. Ellis and Butcher refused to supply the rabbits. They said they were already out of pocket over the experiment and that

62 PR, 15 August 1902, p. 395.

63 Royal Commission into Rabbits, 1888-89, Report, p. XXIII.

the commissioners were too slow and too niggardly in settling their expenses.⁶⁴ The commissioners replied that the failure to supply rabbits had occurred long before any difficulties arose over reimbursements and they implied that for a £25,000 reward they expected that the promoters of the scheme would have been more helpful.⁶⁵ The investigating officers and pathologists suspected that a parasite of the coccidiosis family, which breeds in the liver, might be involved and twentieth century scientists tend to agree. Such infections are endemic among wild rabbits and only occasionally cause sudden widespread mortality.⁶⁶ The third major proposal, Dr Watson's scab infection, was found to be quite effective in a mild, wet climate but harmless in the hot, dry interior.

There were several minor dissenting views to the final report but they only concerned disagreements over whether all field tests of chicken cholera microbes should be banned in the interests of poultry, or whether the door should be left ajar, in case there was a remote possibility of achieving something by further experiments. All the members agreed that there was nothing in the present proposals that justified raised hopes of a solution, let alone a £25,000 reward. The evidence on the main submissions was all printed and the Chief Expert's scientific reports were detailed, well presented and clear. From them the day to day, indeed

64 Ibid., Evidence, p. 199.

65 Ibid., Report, p. XXIV.

66 Stead, Rabbit Menace Inquiry, p. 543.

the hour to hour research routine can be reconstructed and it was very thorough. The rest of the evidence comprised interviews with the leading experimenters, the most experienced members of the rabbit branch (including the dismissed Crommelin) and some noted pastoralists, as well as some special evidence from New Zealand. The latter is worth a little attention because it shows the thoroughness of the investigators.

Colman Phillips was a landholder in the Wairarapa District of New Zealand. He was convinced that the answer to the rabbit problem lay in the combined operation of 'natural enemies', primarily ferrets but also dogs and stoats, and a disease, bladder worms. He won many followers and persisted with his campaign until well into the 1920s. His fanatical zeal, and also his nineteenth century romantic view of nature, are illustrated by his statement to the commission:

we shall get little help from the men of science ... Professor Thomas, one of the most able biologists in the colonies I believe, visited the Wairarapa and failed completely to see the beauty of nature's working - this conquest of a pest by means of a worm ... The question arises, then, as to whether there is not a higher law than the minute investigations of scientists.⁶⁷

He was still preaching the same message in 1917: 'As to submitting my plan to a "Committee of Experts", what experts

⁶⁷ Royal Commission into Rabbits, 1888-89, Evidence pp. 115-6.

have you? I think I may say, without egotism that I happen to be the only "expert" on Nature's great balance in Australasia'.⁶⁸ Under polite but searching questioning it was revealed that, although he was convinced that the ferret was not only the best 'natural enemy' of the rabbit but was also an ideal spreader of bladder fluke, he had never actually dissected a ferret to find out if it was infected.⁶⁹ Professor Thomas of Auckland, who had undertaken a study of the decline of rabbits in the Wairarapa for the New Zealand government, sent a report showing the weaknesses of Coman Phillips' theories. Thomas concluded that 'Like all parasitic diseases it [bladder worm] is variable and apparently capricious in its distribution, and its propagation is limited by conditions which will vary with locality and season ... [it] must be looked upon as simply a minor and auxiliary means of destruction'.⁷⁰ This could just as well have served as the main conclusion of the Intercolonial Commission's findings and nearly 100 years later it would raise very few scientific eyebrows. The unexpected success of myxomatosis (after years of futile trials) and its every more unexpected lasting qualities (which owe much to sophisticated research into virus strains) have reinforced a largely unjustifiable public faith in such remedies. Contemporary criticism of the scientific competence of the commission was unwarranted.

68 PR, 16 April 1917, p. 348.

69 Royal Commission into Rabbits, 1888-89, Evidence pp. 118, 121.

70 Ibid., Appendix VIII, p. 213.

As regards its positive recommendations the findings of the commission are more open to dispute. It strongly favoured fencing and opposed professional trappers and the bonus system. It said that infested areas should be fenced and cleared; large owners should be compelled to fence and poorer small holders should be grouped together for fence construction. The main weakness of this section of the report was that no experiments on mesh size or height of netting were conducted. Instead the commissioners accepted the weight of pastoral testimony which claimed that $1\frac{5}{8}$ inch, three feet high mesh was the cheapest effective rabbit barrier.⁷¹ Some districts soon reported that too many rabbits could get through and some fences had to be replaced.⁷²

The practical recommendations of the commission were largely reproduced in the 1890 Rabbit Act but this need not mean that the inquiry had much effect on government policy. Both the commissioners and the government were listening to the same group of major pastoralists so it is hardly surprising that they reached similar conclusions. The details of the 1890 act had actually been foreshadowed in earlier bills before the investigation began.⁷³ There

71 Ibid., Report, p. XXXII.

72 Webster, Bygoo, p. 123.

73 See Chapter 5, p. 151.

were also important differences of emphasis. The strong recommendations of the commissioners concerning compulsory fencing and the duty of the government to deal with unoccupied crown lands were ambiguously adopted in 1890. Under the act compulsion could only follow the formal declaration of an infested area, which was a decision made by politicians, not vermin inspectors, and the control of vermin on crown lands, while endorsed in principle was, in practice, left in a kind of financial limbo. The report made no reference to barrier fencing which became the core of official policy in the 1890s. Nevertheless, the inquiry was not just a time serving device, a sop to public demands for action. It was an expensive venture, costing about £12,000 and though it basically provided backing for the kind of legislative changes that had been outlined before it began, it also supplied the scientific justification for an extremely wary attitude towards the introduction of diseases.

The caution shown by all New South Wales governments towards the introduction of a rabbit disease stands in marked contrast to the popular faith in a cheap, quick, 'natural' solution to the rabbit problem and to the generally rash manner in which strange animals had been introduced and drastic changes made to the environment. In part this caution rested on an understandable fear. In the days before penicillin and antibiotics doctors had few remedies

against infection and the death rate for infectious diseases, particularly in childhood, was high. The idea also aroused vague fears about 'playing God'. As The Times of London observed, 'It is impossible to suppress the misgiving that Nature will avenge herself'.⁷⁴ Similar anxieties were widely expressed in the city press. Some rural papers copied the articles and a few wrote their own warnings against growing rural enthusiasm. The Mildura Irrigationist consistently opposed the spread of a rabbit disease: 'The more thoughtful among the residents of the Riverina are beginning to view with considerable alarm the rapid progress which Mr. Pasteur's method of destroying rabbits, by means of disease seems to be making in public favour'.⁷⁵ Yet such was the popular enthusiasm that the authorities were under almost constant pressure to permit a wide range of loosely controlled tests. Sometimes it came from well educated men, like Creed, convinced that a breakthrough was near; more often it came from hard pressed graziers. Nevertheless, a succession of ministries stood firm.

Abigail had proclaimed all use of diseases against rabbits to be illegal except under strict Board of Health

74 The Times, 3 April 1892. Referring to the Australian controversy over the rejection of Pasteur's proposal.

75 Mildura Irrigationist, 14 March 1888.

supervision and this was later codified under the 1890 Animals Infectious Diseases Act. The ruling was rigorously enforced. Despite the support of his local newspaper, the Western Herald,⁷⁶ Dr Samuelson of Bourke lost his license to keep rabbits for the purpose of experimenting with drugs once the Lands Department learned that he was infecting rabbits, rats, sheep and dogs with 'the germs of tubercule, gonorrhoea, septicaemia and syphillis'.⁷⁷ He was allowed to apply for another license under the Animals Infectious Diseases Act but as Samuelson kept complaining 'so far I have learned only what will not satisfy the Board of Health'. An official memorandum makes it clear that the board was not going to be easily satisfied:

It seems to me a matter requiring the most careful consideration whether, in view of the fact that any supervision which the government could exercise over the operations would be almost nominal, it would be expedient, under any conditions, to grant licenses to inoculate domestic animals with the germs of such diseases as tuberculosis and syphillis in a township where the sanitary conditions are such as exist at Bourke. 78

The demand for similar experiments persisted throughout the 1890s, culminating in the Dansyz experiments in 1906.⁷⁹ As well as showing an unquenchable faith in

76 Western Herald 28 October 1891. Quoted in NSWV&P, 1891-92, VIII, 1029.

77 NSWV&P, 1891-92, VIII, 1031. Experiments on Rabbits, Application for a License.

78 Ibid.

79 See Chapter 9.

science such demands also showed a paradoxical lack of faith in Australian scientists. There was much praise for foreign experts, such as Pasteur, Koch and Dansyz and much scepticism about the local experts who disagreed with them. This attitude also led some to a vague 'conspiracy theory' in an attempt to explain why no easy solution had been found to the rabbit plague. In 1891 the Pastoralist and Farmers' Gazette printed a long article on rabbits which was later reprinted as a pamphlet, supposedly because of the demand by the public. It argued that Pasteur's proposal had not received a fair trial:

I know nothing of the people who control the Rabbit Branch of the Lands Department. I therefore only write in a strictly impersonal sense in observing that the policy of leaving the initiative in the matter of Rabbit destruction on a comprehensive scale, to a section of administration whose triumph would be the signal for its own demolition, is one which involves a ridiculous contradiction to every known motive by which the action of the average man is influenced. 80

A similar response to a devastating plague has also been observed in Southern Africa following the outbreak of rinderpest in the 1890s.⁸¹ There is no way of estimating how strong such feeling was in Australia at the time and

80 C.M. Smith, Sheep versus Rabbits, an article on Louis Pasteur, reprinted from Pastoralist and Farmers' Gazette, 1891, p. 4.

81 C. Van Onselen, 'Reactions to Rinderpest in Southern Africa 1896-97', Journal of African History, 1972, XIII (3), p. 474.

because a vocal commercial rabbit pressure group emerged during the 1890s it would be unfair to assume that later expressions of similar sentiments were groundless. Oddly enough the development by 1897 of a one dose, heat resistant, long life anthrax vaccine by John Gunn, owner and later manager of Yalgogrin Station, and John McGarvie Smith, a Sydney industrial chemist who had worked with the 1888 French team, reinforced the popular faith in the possibilities of scientific advances without appreciably altering the attitude towards Australian scientists.⁸²

As well as the mainstream of scientific experimenters there was an influential group of men kindly called by Rolfs 'enthusiasts'. Colman Phillips, who never subjected his theories to biological tests, fits this category, as does William Rodier of Tambua Station, near Cobar. In 1888 Rodier bought out his partner following a disagreement over the best method of rabbit control.⁸³ From 1887 until the late 1920s Rodier devoted considerable energy and much money to promoting his remedy. He argued that European rabbits were monogamous and that trapping and poisoning killed more bucks than does, which made the rabbit communities polygamous and turned them into pests. As there was no way trapping, poisoning or drought could kill all the rabbits, the surviving females rapidly restored

82 ANUA, 55/1, J.A. Gunn Papers and newspaper cuttings.

83 Royal Commission to Inquire into the Condition of Crown Tenants Western Division of New South Wales, 1901, Pt. II, pp. 100-6.

the numbers. However, if by deliberate policy only the does were killed, producing an excess of males, in the resulting polyandrous rabbit society drought or unmated bucks would kill the kittens and the bucks would worry the pregnant does into a decline, thus ridding the country of rabbits, except where they were protected.⁸⁴

Rodier used various forms of traps to catch the rabbits alive. He then killed the does and ear-marked and released the bucks. Until the depths of the late 1890s drought he was able to show that his property was much better grassed than those of his neighbours.⁸⁵ He won many supporters, but not among those living on adjoining stations, who became hosts to his much harried buck rabbits. Nor did he convince his brother-in-law, John Hunter Patterson, to whom he was heavily in debt. Patterson thought enough of Rodier to name him guardian to his children and to send his delicate son to stay with his uncle as a jackeroo, but he concurred with the boy's judgment that, where vermin was concerned, Rodier was a 'rabbit maniac'.⁸⁶ Yet Rodier's ideas were taken seriously. Once again there were many who found his view of nature appealing, even though tests failed to show that trapping and poisoning actually killed

84 There is a large collection of Rodier's pamphlets and letters in the Mitchell Library.

85 PR, 15 August 1895, p. 315; 17 September 1895, p. 388.

86 MUA, John Hunter Patterson, Family correspondence, 22 March 1904. Tambua Station was mortgaged to Dalgety Pty. Ltd. The papers are in the ANUA.

more males than females, let alone the validity of the rest of his theory. His evidence to the 1901 Western Lands Royal Commission was praised by Etheridge, the curator of the Australian Museum, Sydney as a common sense approach to the 'survival of the fittest'.⁸⁷ In 1905, when the scheme was being briefly tested at the Randwick quarantine station it was gazetted as an approved way of dealing with rabbit infested land for the purposes of the 1902 Pastures Protection Act.⁸⁸

Unlike Colman's plan Rodier's method involved no dangerous importations but because it condemned poisoning, fumigation and the use of traps that killed, and because Rodier insisted that fencing was a waste of money, unless a landholder was very diligent in the construction of live traps, it did no good. Nevertheless, as late as 1926 David Stead reported that it was still the most widely talked about method ever proposed and in 1922 the Governor General had suggested to the new New South Wales government that it might be a good idea to test it properly.⁸⁹ Dr Purdy of

87 NSWV&P, 1901, IV, 130. Summary of rabbit evidence.

88 NSW Government Gazette, 22 March 1905; Report of the Department of Mines and Agriculture, Stock (P.P.) Branch for the half year to June 1905.

89 Stead, Rabbit Menace Inquiry, p. 372. Rodier was inconsistent. In 1897 he told Dalgety Pty. Ltd in response to an inquiry about proposed new rabbit legislation that those who had already netted their properties should only pay 1/5 not ½ the vermin levy. ANUA, Dalgety Pty. Ltd., 100/4/1/35, Rabbit and Noxious Weed Legislation 1897.

the Metropolitan Board of Health advocated a trial against rats and rabbits on Lord Howe Island but it was decided that the terrain was too rough.⁹⁰

Despite its range of supporters and the fanaticism of its originator, Rodier's scheme had only a brief period of official recognition in 1905. Very few seem to have adopted it, possibly because it was so labour intensive. In view of the protracted interest shown it might have been better had the authorities followed Stead's recommendation and conducted decisive tests, but there were factors making this difficult. One of the appealing features of the plan was that Rodier said fencing was unnecessary, but faith in fencing was almost all that remained of official vermin policy after 1890. It was also apparent that, without fencing, Rodier's scheme could only be tested if all the neighbours in an infested area were forced to participate, otherwise there would be a constant influx of rapidly breeding does and a flight of panic stricken bucks to upset the experiment. If the test was conducted behind effective fencing or on an island the theory could not be proven, because it was common knowledge that, on well netted properties, a hard working manager could get rid of rabbits using conventional methods. Thus official inactivity is understandable.

By far the most important effect of the growing relationship between scientists and politicians was the

90 Stead, p. 384.

creation in 1891 of the combined Department of Mines and Agriculture. The Agriculture Department had to limp along on a budget of £10,000 p.a. but its practical work and its extensive, well written annual gazette were to be of inestimable value.⁹¹ However, it is debatable whether successive governments should be allowed to bask in the Department of Agriculture's credit. The department remained under the smothering wing of the Department of Mines until 1907 and the high quality of its work owes far more to the zeal and calibre of its staff than to the encouragement given in the annual budgets.⁹² Because of its limited finances and its subordinate administrative position it could only undertake research projects of very limited scope, particularly concentrating on animal and plant breeding, practical advice to farmers and the dissemination of new ideas. As Powell had observed, 'the notable preference for recruiting armies of technicians, administrators and scientists into ever expanding government departments ... is a widely recognized peculiarity of the Australian experience'.⁹³ but at least during its first twenty years, possibly because of its lack of funds, the New South Wales Agriculture Department was

91 NSW Budget Estimates, 1891 £10,000; 1894 £15,000; 1898 £25,750; 1898 £30,000; 1907 £46,000; 1908 £122,897 [ie after it became a separate department]

92 M. Hoare, 'Science and Scientific Establishment in Eastern Australia 1820-1890', Ph.D. Thesis, ANU, 1974. Comments on the new, brilliant university leaderships in base metals and agricultural research. Some of these young graduates found their way into the public service.

93 Powell, Environmental Management, p. 172.

one organization that managed to keep in close contact with its public. Through the gazette it frequently told farmers about new techniques for poisoning or fumigating rabbits but it had neither the money nor the authority to conduct its own experiments. The rabbit problem remained the prerogative of the Lands Department and it was common knowledge that 'a kind of subdued conflict' existed between the Lands and Mines Departments over areas of control.⁹⁴

The over all picture that emerges of the effect of experimenters on rabbit policy formation during the last 20 years of the nineteenth century is a fairly bleak one. Much of the best scientific work was ultimately negative in character. It served to strengthen the resolve of the authorities to resist potentially dangerous new initiatives but it did not create new attitudes, nor did it lead to decisive, even if limited policies. Fencing became the central article of government faith but even that was not whole-heartedly adopted. There was no aid for private fencing and not until 1896 was the protective tariff on wire netting abolished. The Department of Agriculture was an important step in the right direction but it was starved of funds and authority. The 1890s were to be years of fumbling indecision amid increasingly loud demands for decisive action.

94 PR, 15 March 1892, p. 536.

CHAPTER 7

The Years of Indecision-
New South Wales 1888-1902

Before any good could come of the New South Wales 1890 Rabbit Act the government had to take the plunge and declare some districts officially rabbit infested. This was not a simple decision. Although it was easy to tell when there were too many rabbits in an area the political act of declaring such a district infested imposed obligations on the government and individuals that had far reaching implications for land tenure, government finances and future election hopes, particularly as the early 1890s were years of financial depression. In March 1891 Parkes issued the regulations under the Rabbit Act and gave notice of intention to proclaim the land districts of Balranald, Cobar, Hay North, Hillston North, Wentworth, Wilcannia, Willyama and portions of Balranald South, Bourke, Cobar East, Condobolin, Deniliquin, Dubbo, Hay, Hillston, Narrandera, Parkes, Urana, and Wagga Wagga.¹ They were proclaimed one month later.

On 15 December 1891 the Dibbs ministry added the

1 NSW Government Gazette, 1891, Vol. 3, p. 3308. Land Board Districts were large areas covering several pastures and stock protection boards. There is a map in NSWV&P, 1894, appendix to the Crown Lands Bill of 1894. The land boards were subdivided into small districts. These are mapped in NSWV&P, 1894, Lands Department, annual report, appendix.

districts north of the Darling to the Queensland border² but explained that, at least until a new budget was passed, there was no money for government fencing. The £12,000 voted for 1891 had been used up.³ At no time during the 1890s were adequate provisions made to cover the cost of fencing unoccupied crown lands. As the Year Books show, almost the entire budgetary allowance of the rabbit branch was committed to administrative costs and barrier fencing.⁴ By the end of 1891 Henry Copeland, Minister for Lands, had made it quite clear to pastoral deputations that 'the government were only too glad to help them to help themselves so long as they did not call upon the government to put their hands in their pockets. But they would give them every assistance to put their hands in their neighbours' pockets'.⁵ Furthermore, in future no area would be proclaimed if it contained so much public land that there would be strong pressure for government expenditure. In 1892 John Gunn concluded that the government's intention was to 'encourage the rabbits and exterminate the graziers'.⁶

As the map in Chapter four shows,⁷ the only

2 Ibid., 1891, Vol. 6, p. 9874.

3 ANUA, J.A. Gunn press cutting book, 24 December 1891, P. 104/27.

4 See Chapter 6.

5 Western Herald & Darling River Advocate, 30 December 1891, J.A. Gunn press cutting.

6 Australasian, 30 April 1892. (writing as 'Manager').

7 See p. 99.

significant extensions to the districts proclaimed in 1891 that had been made by 1894 were in the northern rivers area and, before these were made, the Lands Department had found a new way of ensuring that there would be no heavy claims for the government to meet.⁸ Two important test cases had proved what pastoralists had long suspected: the act was unenforceable against the government. In September 1892 a pastoral lessee tried to make the Lands Department pay half the cost of a boundary fence after the neighbouring selector had walked away from the holding. The claim was rejected on the grounds that approval had not been sought before the fence was built.⁹ A far more significant case was brought by the New Zealand Loan and Mortgage Agency Company on behalf of its Roto Pastoral Holding. In November 1891 the company had asked for ministerial approval for a fence between the property and unoccupied crown land. The Lands Department sent a vaguely worded refusal without explanation. The company went ahead, completed the fence and then sued for half the cost, which came to £102 1s.¹⁰

The authorities did not dispute that the fence was required or that it was erected in accordance with the

8 NSW Government Gazette, 1892, Vol. 3, p. 4112; 1892, Vol. 5, p. 8327; 1893, Vol. 5, pp. 7180, 7276. All were small extensions in districts already partly proclaimed.

9 PR, 15 September 1892, p. 821.

10 Ibid., 15 May 1893, p. 144.

provisions of the act: they simply refused to accept financial responsibility for half of it. The President of the Land Court denounced the department's attitude as 'evasive and a kind of ambushade' and pointed out that 'there was nothing but the state of the public exchequer standing in the way of the Minister paying his contribution'.¹¹ The Supreme Court upheld the verdict that the government could not be compelled to pay for a fence that it had not formally approved and Justices Windeyer and Innes also ruled that, although the court might order the department to supply reasons for the refusal, there was nothing in the act to say that they had to be sufficient reasons. These decisions particularly affected the western lands where millions of resumed acres remained unoccupied. Pastoral ire was further raised by the fact that, although Copeland said he would not take as a gift the worst rabbit infested properties, the parliament merely cut by half the £3 per ton duty on imported wire netting and refused to reduce railway carriage charges. The Pastoral Review also pointed out that New South Wales spent on agricultural and pastoral societies considerable sums that could have been put into the fencing account.¹²

At the same time as pastoralists were becoming frustrated at the government's refusal to face up to its

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 15 April 1893, p. 52. Editorial.
In 1892 £20,000 had been given in pound for pound grants; £10,000 in special grants;
£ 5,000 in national prizes.

responsibilities small holders were becoming worried that the act was being too rigorously applied in the more settled regions.

In June 1891 the Hume Farmers and Settlers' Association met at Burrumbattock to protest at the government's intention to proclaim country between the Murray and the Murrumbidgee as rabbit infested. They advanced without explanation the strange argument that 'it is morally impossible where there are small holdings for it [netting] to be of any use, even if the rabbits are numerous'.¹³ On 19 November 1891 13 pastoralists and two selectors met in Forbes and a resolution was passed to petition Copeland to proclaim the district, to place administration of the act under the stock boards and to repeal the duty on netting.¹⁴ A month later a large public meeting of 50 to 60 landholders met in response to widespread opposition to the petition.¹⁵ The meeting was very divided and obviously many selectors did not understand the difference between petitioning for government financed barrier fences and petitioning for enforcement of the fencing provisions of the Rabbit Act. It was decided to call another meeting and meanwhile to send a telegram to the Lands Department asking that the matter be held in abeyance. On 6 January 1892 the next meeting condemned the proposed move but the minister went ahead and gazetted a small portion of the Forbes land district.

13 Australasian, 6 June 1891, p. 1064.

14 Forbes Times, 21 November 1891. J.A. Gunn cutting.

15 Ibid., 26 December 1891.

Later the same year a large meeting of selectors at Albury opposed the declaration of their area.¹⁶ After some delay the government again went ahead. Another small part of Forbes land district was proclaimed in September 1893¹⁷ but a year elapsed before large sections of the remaining central division districts and parts of the eastern division were incorporated in the infested area, despite the pleas of those who wanted to fence their properties.¹⁸ Because of the extent of opposition the clauses of the 1890 act which authorized the declaration of a state-wide compulsory rabbit eradication period were never employed.¹⁹

The conflict of interest between large and small landholders that had been foreshadowed in the debates of the 1880s had come to the fore. In 1892 two important rural meetings showed the extent of the divisions. In March William Alison, who had played a prominent part in the passage of the 1890 act, chaired a meeting of pastoralists at Nyngan, and in July there was a large gathering of farmers in Wagga Wagga. The speeches made at the Nyngan conference were fully reported in the Pastoral Review and were summarized in the Sydney Morning Herald but

16 PR, 15 November 1892.

17 NSW Government Gazette, 1893, Vol. 5, pp. 7180, 7276.

18 Ibid., 1894, Vol. 5, p. 7543. Included parts of Albury, Cootamundra, Corowa, Cowra, Young, Orange.

19 PR, 17 April 1895, p. 82. Speech by Carruthers. Also NSWPD.

the most interesting accounts were given by local papers, such as the Dubbo Dispatch, the Cobar and Louth Herald and the Western People, which included the interjections and made it apparent that many smallholders and townspeople were very hostile to the pastoralists.²⁰ About 80 people attended the first meeting. Although admission was by ticket and only stockholders could vote a number of unwanted spectators crowded in at the back. The conference claimed to represent the owners of four million sheep and 10,000 cattle. Many pastoral leases in the Cobar area had less than three years to run and occupiers were insistent that they would not invest in fencing unless they were guaranteed more security of tenure. This led many critics to call the conference 'a sort of Guy Fawkes conspiracy against the public - an attempt to lock up the lands against settlement'.²¹ Afterwards a deputation presented the main resolutions to Copeland. These included local administration of any rabbit legislation, preferably through the pastures and stock boards, the liberation of 'natural enemies', increased aid for wire netting purchases and, above all, renewal of pastoral leases for 15 years. The minister bluntly replied: 'If he went to parliament and proposed to give pastoralists an extension of 15 years he would be

20 PR, 15 April 1892; SMH, 11-12 March 1892; J.A. Gunn press cutting book.

21 Dubbo Dispatch, 8 March 1892.

treated as the squatters would treat rabbits - exterminated'.²²

For at least the next ten years, until after the Western Lands Commission, the question of land tenure policy was to overshadow all discussions of the rabbit problem. Selectors argued that New South Wales should adopt closer settlement schemes similar to the Victorian Mallee Land Act. Pastoralists pointed out that there were already vast tracts of land open for selection which no-one was willing to take up. The selectors who met at Forbes to resist the moves to have the district declared infested claimed that selectors' children could keep small runs clear; the pastoralists retorted that 'ten to one you would find them playing somewhere in the scrub instead of being at work'.²³ Anyway, it only needed one careless family for all the unfenced neighbours to suffer. The real problem was that fencing required capital or at least credit. Selectors had little and pastoralists and the rural finance companies, which had taken over many of them, would not invest without security. Security could be achieved only at the cost of future selection opportunities.

The Pastoral Review summed up the dilemma in a series of articles aptly entitled 'Rents, Rabbits and Resumption', which were written by D. Brown of Kallara

22 PR, 15 April 1892, p. 574.

23 Forbes Times, 26 December 1891.

Station. Aware of the problems confronting any government that passed legislation designed to favour one small class at the expense of a larger group, particularly at a time when the Labor party was growing in strength and Dibbs needed its support, the articles sought to make a distinction between the government as legislature and the government as landlord.²⁴ In the view of the large leaseholders the solution to the rabbit problem lay in a fairer definition of the relationship between landlord and tenant under which landholders would not have to look for government assistance through coercive legislation and subsidized stock levies but instead would receive from the landlord rent and tenure adjustments in return for the work they had to do against rabbits.²⁵

During 1892 there were several semi-official tours to inspect the western lands. The Governor visited the Cobar and Bourke districts in February 1892 and William Davis, the member for Bourke, led parties of fellow members to rabbit infested properties.²⁶ The suspicions of some non-pastoral groups about the underlying reasons for such visits were expressed in the Daily Telegraph:

24 PR, 15 April 1892, p. 575.

25 Just as Carruthers and others were influenced by rent theories, such as those of Henry George, which were developed abroad, so pastoralists may have been influenced by the big tenant rights debates in England, which culminated in the 1883 Agricultural Holdings Act. The terminology is similar but the theoretical content is very different.

26 SMH 5-7 February 1892; Wagga Wagga Express 4 February 1892.

All that the public interest requires is that members of Parliament shall not be misled into supposing that a single 'show patch' of rabbit infested country is necessarily typical of the whole, or that, because there are a few distressed pastoralists, they are as a class entitled to state charity. 27

The representatives of the 90 farmers' organizations, fore-runners of the Farmers and Settlers' Association, who met at Wagga Wagga, shared these suspicions. They claimed that all central division holdings should be opened for selection and that rabbits could be countered by government erected barrier fencing. They did not want any district proclaimed infested unless a majority of landholders voted for it.²⁸

More tension within the rural sector developed after the 1894 elections. Rickard has pointed out that many influential pastoralists were not initially greatly concerned at Reid's Free-trader victory²⁹ but the Pastoral Review took a more gloomy line: 'What we are now seeing is the fanatic wing of the Free-traders, led by unscrupulous politicians like Mr Reid, being dragged at the chariot wheels of the single tax wing of the Labor party for the oppression of the producer ...'.³⁰ Nor was it reassuring that the Lands Department came under the control of Joseph Carruthers, already known for his land

27 Daily Telegraph, 20 May 1892. Editorial.

28 PR, 15 July 1892, p. 728; W. Bayley, History of the Farmers' and Settlers' Association of New South Wales, Farmers and Settlers' Association, 1957, p. 40.

29 Rickard, Class and Politics, p. 125.

30 PR, 15 January 1894, p. 539.

reform ideas later epitomized in the slogan 'a million farms for a million farmers'. Yet, paradoxically, Reid's espousal of a single land based tax coupled with an income tax, and the continued demand for more land for selection forced the government to recognize that the 1890 Rabbit Act was inadequate. By 1895 over seven million acres in the western and central divisions had been abandoned to the rabbits. Rabbits were destroying the pastoral tax base and eating out the new selectors. They were even moving into the eastern division.

By 1895 New South Wales was also facing another threat to pastoral and agricultural production. Noxious weeds were increasing at an alarming rate. In 1889 the Sydney Town and Country Journal, a subsidiary of the Evening News, had called the noxious weed threat as serious as that of the rabbit³¹ but although the colony had passed Thistle Acts in the mid-nineteenth century they had not been developed and utilized like their Victorian counterparts. Graziers had waged a long, slow war against the Bathurst burr³² and in 1886 a Prickly Pear Destruction Act had been passed. However, the prickly pear laws did not provide useful precedents for dealing with a wider variety of weeds.

31 Town and Country Journal (Sydney), 9 February 1889, p. 18; 16 March 1889, p. 18.

32 ANUA pastoral finance company records show regular expenditure for burr cutting from the late 1870s. Gangs of cutters were employed. They moved around the districts with the seasons.

Basically they consisted of special lease arrangements for badly infested land, coupled with compulsory destruction clauses. They had not been very widely applied and were not successful. The New South Wales State Archives has extensive files on prickly pear leases. An enormous amount of work would need to be done to sort out the history of individual holdings but it is clear that the failure rate was high. Counter-measures were expensive, labour demands were heavy and the effort was only worthwhile on good agricultural land.³³

During the 1890s a disturbing range of economically worthless plants had established themselves throughout the state. Sweet briar, blackberries, Bathurst burr, Scotch thistle and tobacco-tree plant were probably the worst offenders. Over-stocking, drought and rabbits had made enormous changes to the natural vegetation, destroying many species and opening the way for a take-over by less advantageous kinds. Many of these had been deliberately introduced for decorative or nostalgic reasons but a few, like bracken, tobacco-tree and a variety of dodder (a plant causing staggers in stock) were natives. Travelling stock routes were a major problem. Some way had to be found to finance the clearance of the worst weeds on them, for the

33 The details are given in Chapter 10.

sake of neighbouring properties and to encourage regrowth of feed to assist the movement of stock. There was also concern about the inadvertant introduction of other undesirable plants in consignments of foreign seed or packaging material, and arguments about the best way to approach the question of quarantine were to take up many debates in the new federal parliament. These were not empty fears. St John's Wort was a serious problem in Victoria by the early 1890s and about 1914 skeleton weed, which was almost indestructable at the time, made its appearance in New South Wales wheat lands.³⁴ The actual machinery of quarantine control was a separate issue: the main concern in the 1890s was to find ways to limit the spread of noxious weeds once they appeared in a district. This was one of the few matters on which the Nyngan and Wagga Wagga conferences were in complete accord.

It was thus against a background of an economy emerging from depression, a political system evolving from factions towards clearer party divisions, an increasingly organized farmers' movement and a more and more debt ridden pastoral industry that the government called a series of important conferences to help formulate a replacement for the 1890 Rabbit Act and a new system of control for noxious weeds. One favourable omen was the passage of the 1895

34 Parsons, Noxious Weeds, p. 95.

Crown Lands Act, which was presented in September 1894.³⁵ The debate was long and involved but the final legislation was generally well received. Curruthers' introductory speech emphasised the need to avoid the evils of class conflict and, although he explained that his primary aim was to help the small settler through more liberal terms, a new system of survey before selection and careful classification of land, pastoralists also benefitted.³⁶ They regained possession of the resumed portions of their runs until they were actually needed for closer settlement and they were given lease extensions and greater security against dumpling.³⁷ Many farmers' representatives would have liked to see the whole of the central division opened to selection but most agreed with Gormly that the minister deserved great credit for a clearly thought out piece of legislation that promised a workable compromise.³⁸ Another encouraging sign of the government's good intentions was the inclusion in the 1895 budget of some money to help clear rabbits off reserves.³⁹

At Carruthers' invitation 62 men met at the Lands Department offices on 2-5 April 1895 to help frame a new rabbit act. There were four members of the Legislative

35 58 Vic., No. 18.

36 NSWPD, 1894-95, 72, 433-5.

37 C. King, Outlines of Closer Settlement In New South Wales, Pt. I, NSW, 1957, pp. 133-34.

38 NSWPD, 1894-95, 72, 445-7.

39 NSWPD, 1894-95, 75, 3629.

Council, 16 members of the Assembly, Black (the Victorian Chief Inspector of Vermin), two senior men from the Lands and Mines Departments, one representative of the rabbit trade and the rest were pastoralists (mainly members of boards, rural finance company managers or particularly vocal individuals) and a few farmers' representatives. In his opening speech Carruthers summarized the practical and legislative methods that had already been tried and expressed interest in the commercial utilization of rabbits.⁴⁰ The meeting was then opened for free discussion. According to the Pastoral Review many Labor politicians took up a great deal of time on points of order and procedure although they knew little of rabbits. They were soon rebuked and afterwards spoke much less. By the last day most had stopped attending.⁴¹

After a great deal of uncertainty it was decided to concentrate on repeal of the 1890 Act, local boards, compulsory destruction, commercial utilization, financial aid for fencing and compulsory fencing. Hardly surprisingly the conference found it difficult to reach clear cut decisions. The arguments over the best administrative authority became so confused that sometimes members did not know for what they were voting. Some advocated land boards,

40 Report of the Proceedings of a Conference Respecting the Rabbit Pest, Department of Lands, April 1895, NSW.

41 PR, 17 April 1895, p. 56.

others wanted special rabbit boards and a small majority favoured the pastures and stock protection boards. Most voted for giving the boards powers of compulsion, even if they could not decide to which boards they were referring.⁴² There was general belief in the necessity of fencing but this was coupled with an unwillingness to make every settler contribute regardless of his financial state and the amount of benefit he would receive,⁴³ and even though they all agreed that $1 \frac{5}{8}$ inch mesh was too big, only the chairman's vote determined that $1\frac{1}{2}$ inch, not $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch was a safe maximum.⁴⁴ Commercial utilization proved just as contentious as any of the other points, even among the pastoral representatives. Alison favoured the idea and wanted a state agent sent to London to encourage trade; Gunn claimed that utilization would prevent whole-hearted rabbit destruction.

It is hardly surprising that when Carruthers' legislation was presented in August 1896 it encountered much opposition. While on a visit to Grenfell in June the Minister told those who presented him with a petition for a new act that his proposals would 'enable districts to govern themselves in the matter of rabbits in accordance with local experience and wisdom'. As the Pastoral Review

42 1895 Rabbit Pest Conference, pp. 19-20.

43 Ibid., pp. 26-29. Because the general movement of rabbits was still thought to be north and eastward, it was argued that fences on the southern and western property boundaries conferred greater benefits: they kept rabbits out rather than in. In already infested areas it was an erroneous idea.

44 Ibid., p. 32.

commented: 'It is exactly this possibility that occurs to many to be a fit subject for alarm'.⁴⁵ As the pastures and stock boards of Albury and Germantown had recently bemoaned the fact that 'until rabbits are officially declared to be noxious animals in this district stock boards have no power to offer bonuses',⁴⁶ the journal was undoubtedly correct, but probably its fears were directed more towards other rural bodies than towards the stock boards.

When the draft was laid on the table pastoralists objected that it was left to ministerial discretion whether local control of the proposed rabbit districts would be exercised through an amalgamation of existing pastures and stock boards or through boroughs or municipalities. They also disliked the proposal that two of the five rabbit board members would be appointed by the Minister. The boards would set a rabbit rate, could fine those who did not clear their land and could arrange loans for the purchase of netting. As in previous acts natural enemies of the rabbit were protected. Gormly made a brief reply to the introduction of the bill, regretting that rabbit destruction was not made compulsory.⁴⁷ The measure then quietly lapsed. Apparently the opposition was too strong.

45 PR, 15 June 1896, p. 566.

46 Ibid., p. 590.

47 NSWPD, 1896, 86, 4978.

Nevertheless, calls for legislation to replace the 1890 act continued and, as the districts proclaimed rabbit infested now stretched into the eastern division, the sense of urgency increased. By the middle of 1896 all of the land district of Forbes and a substantial amount of good farming land around Corowa, Orange and Young had been scheduled.⁴⁸ Because local objections were so intense extensions were made in very small steps; but by 1897 it was apparent that all of Deniliquin and Condobolin would have to be fenced.⁴⁹ In September 1896 the Farmers' and Settlers' Association conference at Wagga Wagga again discussed the rabbit question and voted for elected rabbit boards, compulsory destruction on private and crown lands and financial assistance for wire netting.⁵⁰ Parliamentarians were also becoming restive at the failure of the government to present a noxious weeds bill.⁵¹ Once again Carruthers decided to consult the interested parties and another rabbit conference and a noxious weeds conference were convened in March 1897.

The 1897 rabbit conference differed from the one held two years before in that it was composed of the representatives of the pastures and stock boards, selectors'

48 NSW Government Gazette, 1896, Vol. 2, p. 2680.

49 Ibid., 1897, Vol. 3, pp. 3469, 4613; Vol. 4, pp. 4760, 5578.

50 Bayley, Farmers and Settlers' Association, p. 62.

51 NSWPD, 1896, 82, 765 ff. (adjournment debate); 1379; 1896, 84, 2409; 2498; 1896, 86, 4978.

associations and the leading pastoral companies. Only three politicians were invited; all were members of the Assembly and all also represented rural bodies. The omission of the parliamentary contingent may have been one of the ways Carruthers hoped to get more clear-cut advice. He also tightened the structure of the conference by giving the members the rejected 1896 bill for specific discussion.⁵²

Although the Pastoral Review criticised the timing of the conference on the grounds that it conflicted with the pastures and stock protection board elections and so not all infested boards had time to send delegates,⁵³ the gathering was dominated by pastoral representatives; there were so many more boards than there were selector organizations with officials able to go to Sydney for a conference that lasted from 9-17 March. The gathering elected as chairman, Allan Lakeman, a well respected former member for Balranald who had taken a leading part in earlier debates.⁵⁴ At the end of his brief introduction Carruthers pointed out that the bill closely followed the 1895 recommendations 'and it seemed rather hard on him that the persons who framed these recommendations should now condemn them'.⁵⁵ However, the criticism continued.

52 Report of the Proceedings of a Conference Respecting the Rabbit Pest in New South Wales, 9-17 March 1897, NSW.

53 PR, 15 March 1897, p. 56.

54 See Chapter 5, p.162, 168.

55 1897 Rabbit Pest Conference, p. 7.

The second conference was a sectionally narrower group and its objections were therefore more explicit, and it also seems that once legislation had been framed it focused rural attention on other problems which were tangential to the main issue. For all its vagueness the 1895 conference was more concerned than its successor with getting changes to the 1890 act so that the rabbit menace could be tackled afresh. Neither conference could be praised for the impartial spirit in which the various groups approached their task but the amendments made in 1897 show that the dominant group placed efficiency of operation low on their list of legislative priorities.

Because the 1897 conference was a relatively homogeneous body most questions were decided without formal vote. On the crucial question of who would be entitled to elect the new rabbit control body the motion was lost 23 to 11 that those with 100 sheep should have a vote, 22 to 13 that those with 200 sheep should have a vote, and it was finally decided that the number of sheep qualifying a man for a vote should be set at 250.⁵⁶ From the few other important votes that were recorded it appears that there were between 10 and 13 men who supported the small settler interests and that no more than 40 of the 59 members attended at the same time.

The main amendments served to consolidate the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

influence of the pastures and stock protection boards. The existing boards were to be the sole administrative authority, and they should not be amalgamated or attached to a shire without their consent. The government should only nominate one member, not necessarily the chairman, and voting for the five other positions should be on a graduated stock franchise, ranging from one vote for 250 sheep to eight votes for 60,000. Members would only sit for one year, making long term planning impossible. The rival body, the land board, would have no say in vermin control, and all judicial matters would go before Petty Sessions, not the more specialized land courts. To protect the financial well-being of the boards all wire netting advances should come directly from the Lands Department and be secured by individual property mortgages (which would be very difficult for struggling selectors to obtain).

Although the recommendations were so heavily biased towards the pastoralists they did not meet with unqualified approval even from that group. The pastoral interest was more united than most rural sectors but it was not monolithic. There were a few boards, like the one in the badly infested Balranald district, which passed a motion against any further legislation on the grounds that owners were coping successfully.⁵⁷ There were also individual graziers who considered that the boards were

57 PR, 15 February 1897, p. 626.

inept or, as Simpson of Walgett put it, subject to 'fads' such as crow bounties.⁵⁸ In the long settled Hunter River area many influential pastoral families remained aloof from the board politics, although the boards were still dominated by other pastoral families.⁵⁹ In some areas it was also possible for small holders to control the boards if they exercised their votes. Nevertheless, within these kinds of limitations shared by all elected bodies, the pastures and stock protection boards provided a good gauge to pastoral opinion and Carruthers had grounds for feeling peeved that, at the best, the 1897 rabbit bill, which closely followed the conference recommendations, was damned with faint praise,⁶⁰ and more often met with out-right pastoral hostility.

The amended bill was presented in May 1897. It placed administration in the hands of the pastures and stock boards which were to be augmented by two government nominees. The boards could set a vermin levy of up to ½d per sheep and 3d per large stock, and public lands were rated at one sheep to ten acres and cultivated land at one sheep to five acres. Holdings enclosed by netting need only pay half the levy. Boards could compel occupiers to suppress rabbits and could choose to do the work if they

58 ANUA, Dalgety Pty. Ltd., Holdings, 100/4/1/35.

59 S. Eldred-Grigg, 'Pastoral Families of the Hunter Valley 1888-1914', Ph.D. Thesis, ANU, 1978, p. 247.

60 PR, 15 July 1897, p. 227.

did not comply. The cost became a first charge on the land. The government said it would vote some money for dealing with crown lands and for supplying netting finance. The bill diverged markedly from the draft suggested by the conference at only one point; once again the government refused to pay its share of fencing costs unless it had given prior approval.

A number of pastoral finance companies sent copies of the bill to their managers asking for comments.⁶¹ The Dalgety file of answers provides an insight into the features that aroused most concern. The comments ranged from the extreme position that 'if no legislation had been made it would have been better for all interested - nothing but expenditure and waste of public and private money has resulted',⁶² to the mildly approving conclusion that 'details of administration should be fairly safe in the hands of such a preponderance of pastoral people'.⁶³ The most common complaint was that those who had paid for fencing would still have to pay half the levy⁶⁴ and many pointed out

61 Ibid.

62 ANUA, Dalgety Pty. Ltd., Opinions on Rabbit and Noxious Weeds Bills 1897, 100/4/1/35, Mr Simpson.

63 Ibid., Mr D. Brown.

64 The conference had discussed this point but had decided that no fence was impregnable if rabbits were thick enough on the other side. Thus even fully netted properties benefitted from diligent neighbours, and anyway, they should still bear some of the costs of inspection.

that the government could still evade its full responsibility. On the whole the company management was less critical than its clients. The Melbourne branch wrote that the administrative structure was a big improvement on the 1890 act, that cost sharing of fencing on the basis of utility was a useful innovation, and that the idea of land board inspection and certification of fencing was a good idea. The company lawyer, J. Riddock, suggested approaching the Minister about further lessening the burden on those already fenced but the management made an interesting notation on his letter which indicates something of the way such bodies exerted their influence:

We do not think direct communication would be any good - as a rule the Lands Minister deprecates such - Especially in this case, his measure being based upon the views recently placed before him by representatives of the country interests assembled at the recent conferences. The matter now rests with the Legislature. 65

The legislature made short work of the bill. After the first reading it was allowed to quietly fade away. Gormly said this was because a pastoral deputation had pleaded undue hardship⁶⁶ but his own supporters had been far from enthusiastic. They were wary of administration by the stock and pastures boards and disliked the vague financial assistance clauses. The kindest explanation of the failure of the pastoralists to support legislation

65 Dalgety 18 June 1897.

66 NSWPD, 1897, 85, 434.

which they had strongly influenced is that it was presented at a very bad time. The west was experiencing the worst drought in living memory and, after the 1892-93 drought, the denuding effects of rabbits and overstocking and the enormous financial indebtedness of most leaseholders, few pastoralists had any reserves on which they could draw. For the time being nature was dealing ruthlessly with the rabbits, along with their sheep and cattle. As despair swept over the west there was little energy left for new initiatives.

However, the drought cannot provide a complete explanation for pastoral obstreperousness. The 1890 act continued to operate, so even if the 1896 and 1897 bills would have done little to force the government to vote adequate sums to deal with crown lands, at least they would have placed administration of all matters concerning vermin in the sympathetic hands of the pastures and stock boards. The sticking point seems to have been the amount of vermin rate reduction to be allowed on netted properties. This affected large landholders more than small because of the capital outlay involved and also because, from the comments and figures available, it seems that selectors had erected far less rabbit-proof fencing up to that time. The mileage of private fencing was given in the annual stock branch reports of the Department of Mines and sometimes in the Lands Department reports. It was also noted in the Year Books. The figures were based on the estimates

of inspectors and no information is given about their reliability or the state of repair of the fences. An indication of the difficulty of interpreting the statistics is that in 1892-93, the first year when netting was distinguished from other wire fencing, inspectors said there were 53,704 miles of privately erected netting; in 1898 there were 44,868 miles and in 1899 there were 48,765 miles. By 1901 the total was said to have risen to 77,684 miles. For a breakdown into districts it is necessary to look at the maps in some of the Lands Department annual reports.⁶⁷ These suggest that large landholders led the way. Subsidiary evidence comes from the regular reports submitted by the managers of the numerous properties under the control of the pastoral finance companies.

The Australian Agricultural Company was typical of the large companies in its early concern over rabbits. In 1888 the annual report for one of the best of its Liverpool Plains properties noted:

In consequence of the urgent representations of the Superintendent, the Directors have sanctioned the erection of wire netting all along the boundary fence of Warrah, a distance of 86 miles, as a protection against rabbits. The cost in London is £27 per mile. It is not improbable that a further sum of considerable amount will have to be spent in order to make the property, which is intersected by many through-fares rabbit proof. 68

67 NSWV&P, 1894, Pt. 2, Appendix to annual report.

68 ANUA, Australian Agricultural Company, S. 301, Reports, Warrah Station.

In 1891 the manager reported that 75 miles had been finished at a cost of more than £50 per mile: 'it may be that the erection of this costly fence might have been safely postponed for a while, but in the case of such a property as Warrah, it is better to be somewhat too early than a little too late'. By 1895 the property was fully enclosed. The 1908 annual report attested to the value of the work when it authorized the expensive replacement of the old fence with new netting.

Australian Estates was slower to begin fencing its properties but in 1894 the report on Boolcarrol Station, near Wee Waa on the Liverpool Plains, commented that 'it is quite a treat to scrutinize the results of this property after having been engaged for some days in dealing with the scrubby, rabbit infested runs in the Nyngan and Cobar Districts'.⁶⁹ However, the discovery of nine young rabbits in a burrow on the property made the inspector anxious and it was decided to fence if the 1895 Land Act was satisfactory. The badly infested Cobar station, Springfield, was extensively re-netted in 1896 after flood damage in 1894.⁷⁰

Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company (AML&F) was the pastoral finance house most deeply committed in the western division. By 1885 the very able, though very difficult General Manager, Edmond Young, who

69 ANUA Australian Estates Company Ltd., 5/1, Reports Boolcarrol Station 1889-1929.

70 Ibid., 5/13. Springfield Station.

had wide experience of Australian conditions and regularly visited the colony, was warning the company of the seriousness of the rabbit problem.⁷¹ By the early 1890s large investments had been made in rabbit-proof fencing. By 1892 Paddington Station, Cobar, had erected over £4,649⁷² worth of netting and by 1897 inspectors were arranging for more fencing on the enormous far west stations, Cuthawarra, Sturts Meadow, Wonnaminta, Nundora and Mt. Arrowsmith, to divide previously fenced large paddocks.⁷³ In the same year the inspector reported that the £2,276 spent netting Wallandra Station, near Hillston, had proved worth the money⁷⁴ and the badly infested Paika Station, Balranald, was fully enclosed in 1896 by 62 miles of netting costing £1,550. This was a substantial proportion of the total value of improvements on the run, which only came to £2,975.⁷⁵

Because this thesis deals with official not private policy formation I have not done the extensive analysis necessary to work out just how heavy pastoral

71 J.D. Bailey, A Hundred Years of Pastoral Banking: A History of the Australian Mercantile Land and Finance Company, Oxford, 1966, p. 99.

72 ANUA, AML&F, 6/106/69b - Paddington Station.

73 Ibid., 97/2/1. London Report 21 November 1897.

74 Ibid., 6/106/28b - Wallandra Station.

75 Ibid., 6/106/25. Paika Station.

investment was in netted fencing by the late 1890s. It was obviously sufficiently great to make many influential men suspicious of the worth of new rabbit legislation which did not provide vermin tax exemptions for those who had netted their properties. The situation had reached an uneasy balance of opposing interests. The pastoralists, who had been the main rural group insisting on action against the rabbits had, during the early 1890s, done far more than the government under the 1890 act. When the easing of the general economic situation began in the mid 1890s it rekindled the interest of the Reid government in land reform and associated vermin and weed problems, but the drought made the pastoralists particularly intransigent as regards any matter touching their own expenditure.

The drought also helps to explain the reception of the 1897 noxious weeds bill but, even if there had been no drought, this legislation would probably have received rough handling. As Carruthers said, discouragingly, at the first reading: 'This is experimental legislation and although very much needed there is no reason for hurrying its progress through the House'.⁷⁶ The noxious weeds conference, which met 16-19 March 1897 to consider the draft bill, had been attended by 47 men.⁷⁷ All except three had attended

76 NSWPD, 1897, 87, 483.

77 Report of the Proceedings of a Conference Respecting the Noxious Weeds Pest in New South Wales, commenced 16 March 1897 at the Chambers of Commerce, Sydney. NSW.

the rabbit conference. Because weeds were considered a relatively more serious problem in the better parts of the central and eastern districts than in the west, the preponderance of pastoralists was less marked, but representatives of the stock and pastures protection boards were still in a majority. Discussion was poorly organized and although the proposed legislation was amended by the gathering it remained hard to understand and vague on essential points.

Administration was placed in the hands of the pastures and stock boards and the municipalities which were, or might be, formed to manage town lands, but apart from an unspecified tax on stock using the travelling stock routes the sources of finance were not clarified. The local authorities could sue for the repayment of compulsory clearance work but experience during the 1880s had shown how difficult it was to present a satisfactory case at Petty Sessions. Where a lessee had an unexpired term of seven years to run, he was solely responsible for all costs incurred. For lesser terms the cost was borne proportionally by landlord and tenant but where the lease was due to end in less than two years the landlord was solely liable for weed clearance. To this Carruthers added the clause 'provided that no lessee or licensee of Crown Lands shall be entitled in any case to put the Crown into the position of bearing the whole (or any) cost'.

In 1894 the Pastoral Review had written of the

need for 'modest and frugal' noxious weed legislation,⁷⁸ but the problem was not a modest one and the available solutions were not cheap. The bill met with 'almost unbroken unanimity of denunciation'.⁷⁹ Both large and small landholders dreaded the financial consequences of compulsory eradication. They pointed to the bad example set by the authorities in dealing with prickly pear, and pastoralists argued that it was unfair to make one heavily indebted segment of society pay for years of official neglect: 'Let the whole colony bear the expense of clearing the stock routes etc. as the whole colony is to blame, through its representatives in Parliament for allowing the present deplorable condition of things to exist'.⁸⁰ The bill was not read a second time. As Victoria had discovered years before, when confronted with the possibility of compulsory weed extermination, many landholders decided that the weeds were not so bad after all, though few went as far as the man who actively encouraged burrs because they added to the weight of his wool clip.⁸¹

However, years of bitter familiarity with weed and vermin infestation could not entirely hide the ever-growing seriousness of both problems, and preoccupation with immediate financial concerns could not disguise the fact that losses from the spread of weeds and vermin were

78 PR, 15 December 1894, p. 508.

79 Ibid., 15 July 1897, p. 227.

80 Dalgety, 100/4/1/35. Mr Ogilvie, Glen Innes.

81 1897 Noxious Weeds Conference, p. 7. Reported by Atkinson, an eastern division landholder.

affecting more and more settlers. During 1898 and 1899 much parliamentary time was taken up with federation but the pastoralist, Thomas Waddell, who became Premier in 1904 and in 1913 was re-elected as a Farmers' and Settlers' member, two leading selectors' spokesmen, Hayes and Gormly, a Forbes farmer, Thomas Brown and the country newspaper proprietor and member for Rylstone, (just ahead of the advancing rabbits) John Fitzpatrick, kept asking when the long promised rabbit and weed bills were going to be introduced.⁸² Finally Fitzpatrick was told that a rabbit bill would be presented next session, 'and it will rest with hon. members to assist in passing it into law'.⁸³ No bill was forthcoming in 1899.

Much of the long delay was due to the inability of rural bodies to agree about administrative details and the understandable financial fears of small landholders. However, as shown by the notices of intention to erect rabbit-proof fences, which were printed in the Government Gazettes, legal demands for neighbours to share fencing costs under the 1890 Rabbit Act continued through the years 1895 to 1900. Whereas a noxious weed act would necessitate additional taxation, a new rabbit act need not prove much more expensive than the existing vermin rate levied by the pastures and stock boards to deal with other pests. Evidence about the opposition to control by the pastures

82 NSWPD, 1898, 92, 514; 1895, 93, 337, 434, 750; 1898, 94, 1957; 1898, 95, 2275.

83 Ibid., 1898, 96, 3992.

and stock boards is patchy but the influential Farmers and Settlers' Association was not markedly hostile.⁸⁴

There was far more feeling against centralized control, and the land district concept had not won many ardent supporters. It is impossible to predict how the representatives of small landholders would have voted if they had been presented with a bill, but Gormly's charge that the delay was due not to the opposition of selectors but to the adverse reactions of influential pastoral groups seems substantially correct.

It was not until 1900 that new rabbit legislation was passed, and then it was with very little debate. This apparent anti-climax is not hard to explain. In 1899 the Labor party defected from the alliance with Reid and a new Protectionist ministry under Lyne was elected. It was recognized as a country ministry.⁸⁵ More importantly, from the point of view of rabbit legislation, 1900 gave false promise of the end of the drought.⁸⁶ As John Fegan, Minister for Mines and Agriculture said in his second reading speech to the Pastures and Stock Protection (Rabbit) Act, new grass had to be protected against the rabbits and so the pastures and stock protection boards had urgently requested legislation.⁸⁷ Moreover, all the measure did was reinsert

84 Bayley, Farmers and Settlers' Association, pp. 66, 92.

85 Rickard, Class and Politics, p. 159.

86 King, Outlines of Closer Settlement, p. 114 drought list.

87 NSWPD, 1900, 106, 3803.

the word 'rabbit' into the Pastures and Stock Protection Act. This meant boards could if they wished, act against rabbits while they were still scarce, in exactly the same way as they acted against any other declared pest. The cost would be determined by the electors of the boards. It was a very weak move but, as Fegan said: 'It is necessary that something should be done immediately until a more comprehensive measure is passed'.⁸⁸

Debate began at 1.12 a.m. and, not surprisingly, was poorly attended. In the Council Kater warned that too many individual boards left rabbit destruction to their neighbours, but he advocated acceptance because it was a step in the right direction.⁸⁹ There were no amendments or delays. The following year the Department of Mines and Agriculture reported that a number of conferences of groups of boards had been held to discuss the best way of dealing with the pest, and it was hoped that simultaneous action would result. However, the department warned that 'the destruction of rabbits is a matter that calls for constant and energetic work and vigilance, and if any of the Boards propose to do it under the scalp system they could not possibly make a greater mistake'.⁹⁰ Some had already indicated their eagerness to adopt that very course.⁹¹

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 4008.

90 Annual Report Department of Mines and Agriculture, Stock and Brands Branch, 1901.

91 NSWPD, 1900, 106, 4007.

Unlike many supposedly short term measures the Pastures and Stock Protection (Rabbit) Act lasted only a year. When Lyne resigned to join the federal government John See became the new leader of the Protectionist government which, without its Labor component, became even more a country ministry. Almost immediately it was confronted with a large pastoral delegation which urged the new minister, Patrick Crick, to declare a wide area of the state rabbit infested and subject to compulsory rabbit destruction and fencing regulations.⁹² They also asked for cost price netting on long-term loans. A similar deputation from the Farmers and Settlers' Association told Crick it was time to replace the 1890 act and to enforce wide-scale destruction of rabbits.⁹³

A major reason for the general flurry of activity was, once again, the connection between land tenure and rabbits. Because of the dire plight of the western landholders a Royal Commission of Enquiry into the Condition of Crown Land Tenants of the Western Division of New South Wales had been set up in 1900. It heard a great deal of evidence about the damage and reduction in carrying capacity of the land due to rabbits, and brought the whole question back to the forefront of pastoral and political consciousness. Because rabbits were a major part of the argument for big rent reductions and long extensions of lease, it also

92 PR, 15 April 1901, p. 85.

93 Bayley, Farmers and Settlers' Association, p. 62.

highlighted the inconsistency of, on the one hand, demanding big concessions because of rabbits and, on the other hand, objecting to legislation designed to force more people to kill them.⁹⁴

Crick's 1901 Rabbit Act repealed the 1890 Rabbit Act and the 1900 Pastures and Stock Protection (Rabbit) Act. It set up new rabbit boards consisting of four elected members and a government nominated chairman. The boards covered the same areas as the existing stock districts and would be financed by a stock levy, fines and a government subsidy. They would pay an inspector who would be responsible to the minister. The government would make budgetary allowances for advances to purchase wire-netting and direct subsidies to the boards. The whole of the state would be declared rabbit infested but it would be left to the minister to decide whether a rabbit board actually had to sit and impose a levy, and the western division would be considered separately.⁹⁵

The parliamentary debate was long but repetitive rather than detailed. Once again the minister claimed that, at least in one important respect, the measure was a short term expedient; it was intended to drastically revise the whole pastures and stock protection board system next session. The three main areas of local rural jurisdiction,

94 NSWV&P, 1901, I, 125-136. Brief summary of the evidence on rabbits given to the commission.

95 NSWPD, 1901 (2 ser.), I, 476 ff.

animal diseases, rabbits and noxious animals would then be united instead of coming under three separate bodies.⁹⁶ The only major amendment was made in the Council, which voted for a graduated stock franchise for rabbit board elections.⁹⁷ Crick pointed out that small landholders would still comprise a majority of electors. Gormly and most farmers' representatives wanted one man, one vote, but were prepared to compromise in order to get the measure passed.⁹⁸

The following year the Pastures Protection Act was introduced. Crick emphasised that it was primarily a consolidating act, uniting under one board the functions of sheep and stock management, noxious animal control and rabbit eradication.⁹⁹ As a result the powers and penalties were very similar to those in the earlier acts. The new pastures protection boards would have six elected members and a government nominated chairman. Three members would be elected every two years, to give some continuity. A graduated stock franchise would be used but provision was made for non-stock-owning landholders. A maximum tax rate was set and occupiers of fully netted properties only had to pay half. The minister appointed the inspectors but they were paid set salaries by the boards. The boards also paid three per cent of their funds to the treasury to cover administrative costs and could receive government loans at

96 Ibid., 1901, 4, 4037.

97 Ibid, 4249. Kater.

98 Ibid, 4480.

99 Ibid., 1902 (2 ser.), 9, 4635.

five per cent interest. There were also provisions for a subsidy payment and for government advances for the purchase of wire netting. As before the government was only liable to share the cost of fences for which it had given prior approval.

The debate was very tightly controlled by Crick. He was frequently one of the most scurrilous, disruptive members of the Assembly, but he had the insider's knowledge of how to deal with those who tried obstructive tactics against himself. When two Labor men, Nielson and Millard, tried to side-track the debate into an attack on squatters Crick gave them short shrift. At one stage he said he did not care if the legislation never passed and he would throw it under the table if the Assembly did not apply the gag.¹⁰⁰ Members returned to a rapid assessment of the main clauses. The Legislative Council made a few minor administrative amendments which were accepted without debate. Alison summed up the typical pastoral reaction; he thought that, for a time the bill would work well, but that some day stockowners would have to get full power over the appointment of inspectors and the board membership.¹⁰¹

The act was a clever piece of drafting amalgamation but it left the state with a clumsy system of vermin

100 Ibid., 1902, 9, 4831.

101 PR, 15 January 1903, p. 776.

control. Administration was shared between the Department of Lands and the Department of Mines and Agriculture. For instance, stock functions and supervision of vermin control were the responsibility of the Department of Mines and Agriculture but fencing regulations were overseen by the Lands Department. The Lands Department also acquired considerable powers of patronage. Whether Crick, who was revealed by the 1906 Lands Commission Inquiry as a blackmailing extortionist, was aware of this factor is an open question. For a brief time in the mid 1890s it had appeared that policy was being formed as a result of direct consultation with the interested parties. This did not work. Even when Carruthers restricted the circle of advisors he still did not get effective recommendations. The problem had dragged on too long. Sensibilities had been blunted and some of the men most concerned with vermin control had made expensive commitments to individual action. The laws that were passed were far less serious efforts to solve the known practical problems than stop-gap measures, offered when the gravity of the situation could no longer be completely ignored, and designed to offend as few people as possible. The politics of sectional and party groupings were becoming the dominant feature of vermin control policy. After 20 years of experimenting with other forms of administration the pastoral boards were given a second chance to show that they could cope with the rabbit. They had won out by default and opposing voices were soon raised again. During the twentieth century the partiality of the local

boards, the role of commercial rabbiters, the question of state and federal assistance for fencing and the unresolved noxious weed problem did not so much add new dimensions to the controversy as accentuate an existing tendency for vermin debates to be overshadowed by much broader political concerns.

CHAPTER 8

Native Vermin Policy

There is an Australian version of a well-known armed services saying which goes 'If it moves, kill it: if it does not move, cut it down'. Under this regime Europeans drastically altered the Australian environment. In some cases native animals were exterminated but in a few instances the environmental changes removed population restraints on native species and their numbers increased. Then there was additional incentive to kill more of them and some came under the vermin acts. Yet within the broad category of native vermin there were considerable variations of response and it is these differences that interest me. They reveal something of the way in which perceptions alter and something about the kinds of pressures that were applied to governments that either made them receptive to the idea of becoming financially or administratively involved or made them reluctant to adopt firm measures. Very little basic research has been done in this area so because of the difficulties of getting information and in an effort to clarify my argument I will concentrate on three groups of animals: kangaroos and wallabies, dingoes and wild dogs and wombats.

Logically vermin laws should be the opposite side of the coin to animal protection laws but in practice it does not always work out that way. For instance skin traders

may have advocated protection laws to ensure a breeding season.¹ Compromises may have to be reached between groups in the community, such as graziers, farmers, sportsmen and skin hunters, which apply different economic criteria to their assessment of the worth of an animal, as well as with those who value an animal for non-economic reasons. Therefore, particularly in this chapter, there is inevitable overlapping between the question of vermin policy formation and the issue of conservation.

Some creatures, most notably the emu,² wander in and out of the vermin lists but until recently there was rarely any dispute in rural areas about how to categorize dingoes. As early as 1839 the Sydney Herald was urging the Council 'to take prompt measures to exterminate noxious wild animals', by which they meant dingoes. The paper urged that the government could offer rewards for the destruction of native dogs 'just as legally as it may extend rewards to persons apprehending runaway convicts, or for the conviction of robbers or murderers'.³ Like most members of the dog family the dingo has probably always had a small group of admirers. In the 1830s there was a craze for keeping them as pets in Sydney⁴ and in the 1880s it was claimed that some

1 1887 Intercolonial Stock Conference, NSWV&P, 1887 (2), IV, 511.

2 The emu was first protected in New South Wales by the 1893 Native Birds Protection Act, which was primarily a game law rather than an exercise in conservation.

3 Sydney Herald, 27 July 1839.

4 Rolls, They All Run Wild, p. 361.

dog breeders would pay up to £50 for a pure-bred.⁵ Nevertheless, in country districts there was agreement that sheep and dingoes were incompatible and so the first vermin laws in the new land were framed against them.

Initially the laws only sought to control the setting of traps and to ensure that poison baits were not scattered too widely without some warning to neighbours and the public, but they soon moved beyond this regulatory function to include such matters as the compulsory sharing of expenses where baits were laid on property borders.⁶ In this small way the wild dog acts provided legislative precedents for later vermin laws which involved much heavier expenditure on the part of landholders. During the 1830s and 1840s in the more closely settled country districts of New South Wales and Victoria dingo hunting became a social event, akin to fox-hunting.⁷ As with the fox in England this activity did not make the quarry any the less vermin but it helped reduce the need for laws compelling its destruction. Because of its comparatively slow breeding rate the native dog was easily driven from settled areas.

The early pastoralists assessed their new environment in terms of its sheep (or cattle) bearing

5 Town and Country Journal (Sydney), 15 March 1882.

6 Native Dogs Destruction Act 1852 16 vic. 14; 1875 39 vic. 15; see also Chapter 4.

7 Kiddle, Men of Yesterday pp. 80, 86, 87.

capacity but their reaction to the dingo was not simply an unreasoning aversion to an insignificant native competitor. They were just as hostile to domestic dogs that went wild but they found the control measures far more difficult to formulate. Much legislative time in both colonies was taken up with Dog Acts, which were not just ways of regulating the hordes of city mongrels but were also attempts to protect farmers from a growing menace and to clarify when a man was entitled to destroy what might be another man's property. In 1877 the Australasian took up the cause pointing out how at the start of every session farmers were 'tantalized by the apparition of a law for the suppression of dogs' and how the failure of municipalities to enforce existing laws was retarding the wider adoption of sheep farming.⁸ Appropriately most rural publications wrote of a wild dog menace rather than specifying a dingo problem and later legislation was often passed under this name, despite the difficulty of deciding whether scalps presented for bounty payments were genuine 'wild' dogs.

With the exception of western New South Wales, the Great Dividing Range and the Mallee, dingoes in New South Wales and Victoria were well under control, often non-existent, by the 1870s, and graziers were already making a connection between the massive growth in the marsupial population and the decline of the natural predator, but this

8 Australasian, 11 August 1877, p. 182.

did not cause a change in attitude.⁹ One dingo on a run was one dingo too many and baits were set out and trappers brought in. It was not that graziers' perceptions of their environment were so narrow that they could not see that there was a role for the dingo, it was rather that their emotional commitment to their flocks was so strong that they could not tolerate a deliberate sheep killer. A man might become blunted to the effect of rabbits on pasture or fatalistic about the ravages of liver fluke on stock but the sight of maimed and half-eaten sheep retained its impact. In addition it was satisfying to be able to hit back at a visible enemy. Too much damage was done by forces beyond an individual's control, such as drought, disease, fire, flood and the international wool market. However, it must be emphasised that, whatever the ultimate scientific verdict on the damage done by dingoes, the evidence available to graziers until after the Second World War strongly supported the traditional view of the dingo as a hunter killer. The Pastoral Review abounds in descriptions of large nightly kills and although the dingo may prefer to single out one target and make a straight kill, in a melee of silly sheep there were apparently many incidentally mauled casualties¹⁰ and shepherds had long known it did breeding ewes no good

9 See Chapter 4, p.110. The growth in the marsupial population was probably a result of changes in pasture rather than the decline in the dingo population but this later discovery does not affect the argument.

10 Australasian, 11 December 1880, p. 761. Claims that 20 sheep were mauled for every one killed.

to frighten them into a panic. The independent minded young scientist, Francis Ratcliffe, reported that on one unnetted western New South Wales block wild dogs were held responsible for the total failure of the lambing season.¹¹ Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the stock branch published annual estimates in its reports of the sheep losses attributed to wild dogs. Dingoes were blamed for between £20,000 and £30,000 worth of stock losses every year and domestic dogs that had gone wild were blamed for slightly more. The estimates rose in the twentieth century.

Because of its unequivocal status as vermin the dingo was a prime target when the major vermin acts of the 1880s were being framed in New South Wales. In 1880 the pastures and stock protection boards were set up and from their inception offered bounties on wild dog scalps. In Victoria, with its lesser problem, the wild dog did not find its way into the new vermin laws till ten years after the first rabbit act but by 1890 the vague powers previously held, if little exercised, by the municipalities had been tidied into the new Vermin Destruction Act, under the centralized control of the Department of Lands. It is an indication of the relatively low importance placed on dingo infestation in Victoria that this act only specifically set bounties on foxes and left other payments to the discretion of the municipalities. Later governments became far more cautious as increasing numbers of claims were received from

11 Ratcliffe, Flying Fox and Drifting Sand, p. 235.

East Gippsland and the Mallee.

In New South Wales the determination of bounty levels was always the prerogative of the stock and pastures protection boards, later the pastures protection boards. In Victoria, with its centralized system, there was always a high degree of departmental wariness about bonuses. Sometimes a ceiling figure was set. In 1893 the Northern Vermin Board, which covered much of the Mallee, refused to pay less than 30s each for wild dog scalps, so the department set an upper limit of £100 for reimbursements.¹² The same year New South Wales boards were paying 10s to 63s for scalps and the department returned the money in proportion to the percentage of the maximum vermin rate that had been levied, up to pound for pound, but very few districts levied the full permissible rate.¹³ In 1915 the Victorian Vermin Destruction Act set the maximum wild dog bounty at 20s and stated that municipalities could not be compelled to pay more than £200 p.a. and the government would not return more than £100. Because the New South Wales government had no control over the boards' power to set bonuses there was little discussion of the topic in the 1890s or the early twentieth century, despite the enormous furore over the rabbit bounties of the 1880s, which had left the state half a million pounds in debt. The one lasting effect was that the state refused ever again to pay a bounty on rabbits. The

12 McLeod Letter Book (2) 2 February 1893; 4 February 1893.

13 Annual Report Stock & Brands Branch, Department of Mines & Agriculture, 1892-93.

shrewd, successful South Australian pastoralist, Peter Waite opposed the bounty system. In 1917 he wrote to the Pastoral Review: 'The system of payment for scalps so far from exterminating the pest has not even reduced it, but on the other hand has firmly established the scalping industry'.¹⁴ However Waite had few supporters.

On the other hand, although most of the relevant Victorian files have been lost or destroyed, there are a few surviving memoranda that indicate that expense-conscious civil servants shared Waite's view. They doubted that professional hunters would willingly work themselves out of business and they believed that, if farmers were sufficiently harmed to warrant setting bounty payments, they would pay to do the necessary killing themselves.¹⁵ The rural counter-argument, particularly in the case of the wild dog, was that

14 PR, 17 February 1917, p. 147. On the other hand, on 10 February 1978 on the A.B.C. mid-day rural session, radio 3, NSW, the Chairman of the Wild Dog Destruction Board commented on the call by the Maitland Pastures Protection Board for the restoration of a government reimbursed bounty on wild dog scalps. He admitted the bounty had not solved the problem before, and may even have helped perpetuate it, but he argued that it was better than nothing. The bounty issue is far from dead.

15 Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board, Miscellaneous files relating to wild dogs. Memorandum from a senior inspector (?) 1902.
PR, 15 June 1897, p. 180. Victorian Chief Inspector said the fox bounty was much abused, and he only reluctantly agreed to accept the Shire Councils' recommendations that it be continued. In 10 months 17,500 scalps had been collected.

the pest was too cunning to be caught by hard-working farmers: plenty of time and professional expertise were needed to trap and poison wild dogs. This argument is the basis of continued scalp payments in a number of states.

The strongest evidence of the sincerity of rural belief in the need to control wild dogs come from the willingness of landholders in badly infested areas to pay for barrier fencing. The original barrier fences in the eastern states were intended only to counter rabbits but very soon there was agitation to have them heightened and reinforced against wild dogs. Kidman, who was not prone to spend rashly on his enormous properties, laid out large sums on protective fencing, even though he was not willing to contribute to a general fund for the same purpose.¹⁶ Perhaps he believed he had done enough or may be he doubted the idea of joint projects. The western end of the Queensland rabbit proof border fence was taken over by a local New South Wales trust¹⁷ and in 1917 Bourke stockowners voted to build 46 miles of wild dog proof fencing on the border at a cost of £2,000.¹⁸

During the war years all fencing suffered from the shortage of wire, labour and capital for investment, and in

16 Hardy, West of the Darling, p. 231.

17 PR, 15 April 1912, p. 312.

the far west of New South Wales the backlog was not made up during the 1920s. Coincidence or not, western division graziers linked the spread of wild dogs with the decline in lambing. Although the northern and southern tablelands also demanded assistance against wild dogs during this period the most insistent calls came from the western division.¹⁹ It is tempting to link the political persistence of these graziers with the fact that the western division was the only part of the state where the pastures and stock protection boards did not control vermin expenditure. Instead the area was centrally controlled through the Western Lands Commission. Therefore landholders had an outside body against which they could complain, rather than having to complain about the way their own neighbours ran things. There were also clear grounds for dissatisfaction. The commission refused to publish a balance sheet. The chairman claimed that if a balance sheet was issued, and it showed a substantial amount in hand, some politicians would demand the withdrawal of government subsidies and the commission would have no reserves to meet emergencies.²⁰ In June 1928 the Wild Dog Destruction Fund spent £17,900 of its total deposits of

18 PR, 16 May 1917, p. 417.

19 ANUA, Graziers' Assoc. Records. 1924 investigation into L. Le Souef's suggestions for wild dog control. E 256/153/9972; 1929 Brindabella Dingo Destruction Assoc. estimated annual losses on the Monaro High plains at £200,000 E 256/220/DC11, Rolls, p. 362. New England dingo control.

20 ANUA, Graziers' Assoc. Records E256/194/DC1, 1928.

£36,081.²¹ The balance was supposedly held to cover the enormous damage done during drought induced dust storms that buried the fence and during the periodic floods that submerged hundreds of miles of fencing, sometimes for years, but graziers did not believe that this justified a poorly maintained fence the rest of the time. However, any explanation in purely political terms of the level of agitation in the western division runs up against the fact that, although the tablelands had a problem, the west was by far the worst affected region. In the 1970s New South Wales spent over £200,000 p.a. on the dingo fence and the Agricultural Gazette still presents the view that a 5,000 head sheep property adjoining a well maintained barrier fence may have up to 2,000 more lambs annually than when the fence was not dog proof.²²

The one definite statement that can be made about the official response to claims of a wild dog menace up to 1930 is that, in areas where numbers of wild dogs bred, there was always considerable pressure on the government to act. For all its scepticism the Victorian government retained the bounty system. The amounts were small, the political pressure on local members was great and the evidence about the economic necessity of the bounty was inconclusive. The same writ large applied to New South Wales. For

21 Ibid., 22 October 1928.

22 New South Wales Agricultural Gazette, 87 (3), 1976, p. 50.

largely emotional reasons many lightly infested districts continued to offer bounties but it would be unwise to explain the wild dog barrier fence policy and the bounty payments of the Western Lands Board and the eastern tablelands simply in terms of emotional over-reaction or prejudiced environmental vision.

The treatment of wallabies and kangaroos under the vermin laws is more questionable. As Powell pointed out, from the earliest days of settlement these animals have had the misfortune to be seen as 'edible, game and vermin'.²³ Add the later skin-hunters and there can be little surprise that Victorian landholders soon rid themselves of any serious threat and kangaroos never figured in the Victorian vermin statutes. A sparser population and large, relatively untouched breeding areas of unoccupied crown lands meant that New South Wales did not find such an easy solution. As was pointed out in Chapter Four the first New South Wales rabbit acts were partly carried because they also promised to provide a way of controlling marsupials.²⁴ Once they were classed as vermin and came under the control of the local boards the government had as little control over the chosen counter-method as they had over wild dog control. Whereas the boards had to admit that they could not cope with rabbits, they never said that they could not manage to deal with

23 Powell, Environmental Management, p. 30.

24 See Chapter 4, p. 105.

the much slower breeding native animals. The central authority was left with only one big question: should kangaroos and wallabies be classed as vermin?

In the days before controlled pasture studies it was orthodox belief that all herbivores competed for feed. This put kangaroos and wallabies in competition with sheep and cattle and, as herds of marsupials are not unobtrusive, settlers soon knew when there were large numbers on their land. With the spread of wire netting they were also blamed for some damage to fences. In 1884 nearly 800,000 kangaroos and over 330,000 wallabies were killed²⁵ in New South Wales in return for bonus payments. By 1890 over eight million kangaroos and about half that number of wallabies had been scalped. In the next ten years bounties were paid on another three million kangaroos and eight and a half million wallabies. The bonuses ranged from 1d to 1s for kangaroos and ½d to 6d for wallabies. Despite these figures the feelings of country people about the animals were different from their attitudes towards wild dogs. There were always many who said that they would not like to see them exterminated. Of course such admissions were often made rather shamefacedly because, as Ratcliffe noted in his travels, expression of sentiment towards native trees and animals seemed to be regarded as 'unAustralian'.²⁶

25 'Annual Report Stock and Brands Branch, Department of Mines and Agriculture NSWV&P, 1883-84, p. 10. The following statistics are taken from the appropriate annual reports.

26 Ratcliffe, p. 79.

Possibly some of the protection arguments based on the value of marsupial skins were attempts to save the animals without appearing sentimental. Undoubtedly scientists used the economic argument in urging preservation of native flora. The Victorian government botanist, Professor Alfred Ewart, said in the Victorian Year Book for 1916-17: 'A species once extinct cannot be revived by any means; and to allow plants to become extinct before all their economic possibilities have been thoroughly tested is a wanton wasting of the hidden treasures which Nature scatters lavishly around us'.²⁷ The economic value of the rare and delicate orchids it was hoped to save at Wilson's Promontory National Park must have been value well hidden. Nevertheless, similar views were expressed in the New South Wales Year Book.²⁸ Native animal protection laws were passed in New South Wales at a time when Victoria was still relying on two national parks to save endangered species. Possibly the known scale of slaughter in the larger state forced the issue to wider attention.

In 1902 a private member's bill to protect native animals was unsuccessfully introduced. It was presented again in 1903, this time with the firm support of the Premier, John See. The bill called for absolute protection of red and grey kangaroos, wallaroos, opossums, koalas, wombats, platypus and echidna for two years, after which

27 Victorian Year Book, 1916-17, p. 68.

28 New South Wales Year Book, 1921, p. 104.

the last two would be given perpetual protection and the rest would be covered by a closed season 1 July to 31 December.²⁹ The main argument advanced in favour of the measure was that ruthless killing was destroying a potential economic asset but the inclusion on the list of two clearly non-commercial species, wombats and echidna, show that other factors were also involved.³⁰ See made much of the fact that representatives of the skin trade agreed almost unanimously that protection was desirable,³¹ but some members were not convinced. Broughton O'Connor, a former free-trader representing the Sherbrooke electorate, where there were kangaroo skin tanneries, said that 'the bill protects a lot of animals absolutely of no use whatever. Of what use is the wombat or hedgehog? Why should we not want to preserve the bunyip? Of what good to the country are a thousand or even a million kangaroos?'.³² He claimed to be more worried about employment in his area than the fate of a few animals. Opponents also likened the new law to the hated English game laws and argued that they would create a new class of criminal: 'The only amusement which the youngster in the country has is shooting'.³³

In the Council some well-known pastoralists, led by Henry Kater and Henry Dangar, doubted the wisdom of

29 Native Animals Protection Act, 1903 No. 18.

30 NSWPD, 1903 (2 ser.), 11, 1984.

31 *Ibid.*, 1986.

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*, 1987.

passing an act that would aid the skin trade and might create a nuisance for graziers. However, Kater and Dangar parted company when the latter insisted that 'it would have been far better in the interests of the settlers generally to bring in a bill to exterminate the whole lot of them [native animals]'.³⁴ He blamed the whole measure on 'rotten sentiment'. A fellow pastoralist, who also opposed the fur trade, A. Ross, took him to task and used some very modern sounding arguments: 'It is not right that the native animals should be exterminated because they do a little damage to some people ... Would any hon. member here like to see the kangaroo or wallaroo or opossum extinguished? ... The landowner has no right to destroy a whole countryside'.³⁵ The Council debate was very short and although a group of 13 to 17 Liberal and Labor men in the Assembly would have delayed the third reading, the legislation was rapidly forced through by use of the gag. Letters to the Pastoral Review were evenly divided between those who thought the act rushed and ill-informed and those who thought it was necessary.

From a conservation point of view it was a weak act. It covered only a small group of animals and, except for the two rarest, the closed season was only six months. More importantly, the Colonial Secretary had absolute discretion to alter the list of scheduled animals and to

34 Ibid., 3307.

35 Ibid., 3308.

vary the open seasons. The significance of the act from the vermin point of view is that it limited the power of the pastures protection boards (without ever once referring to them) and set in motion a new piece of administrative bureaucracy, which provides fresh information on rural attitudes and the politics of vermin control. Any individual or group wanting to alter the schedule had to present a case to the Colonial Secretary. This evidence had then to be checked. The department could hardly call on the pastures protection boards to provide impartial reports: they were often the petitioning parties. There was still no compulsory shire organization that could be utilized throughout the state, so, as had happened in Victoria in the 1890s, the police found themselves with a role in the assessment of vermin infestation.

The most striking impression given by the surviving files is of the apparent efficiency of the administrative agency, the Colonial Secretary's Department, and the independence of the reports it received from the local agents, in this case the police.³⁶ As soon as an application was received reports were requested from the local constable and the surrounding police stations. It was acknowledged departmental policy to follow the recommendations. In contrast to many Lands Department decisions, applications were processed with remarkable speed. From

36 The surviving files are held in the State Archives of New South Wales, Fauna Protection bundles ML 5250 and 5331.

original letter, through inspection to final answer rarely took one month and usually only took three weeks, and most files had a minimum of three police reports. The comments received were very frank and most did not favour extensions of the right to kill:

From enquiries made and the Constable's own knowledge the animals mentioned are not on the increase ... those principally concerned about the matter are people who partly earn their living with the gun. 37

... managers made no effort or incurred any expense themselves during the present open season ... their desire is to have protection removed altogether and will continue agitating in the hopes of attaining that object. 38

It is evident the intention of the Pastoralists in the Western Division is to keep on agitating with a view to having protection absolutely removed from kangaroos and emus. 39

Mr McGinty has a large family of grown up, indolent sons who no doubt expect to benefit ... so they may make a living without hard work. 40

The department was aware that once an area was opened for increased shooting kangaroos and other hunted animals tended to move to previously untroubled areas, so the comment was frequently added to the files that districts had to be considered as blocks and alterations to the schedules were made accordingly.⁴¹ This was a lesson that

37 Tooloom (near Lismore) October 1911, ML5230.

38 Coonabarabran and Milparinka, Police Constable Keagle, March 1914, ML 5331.

39 Wilcannia, 31 January 1914, ML 5331.

40 Inverell, Sen. Constable Graham, ML 5250.

41 Memorandum 30 December 1910, ML 5250.

the pastures protection boards were unwilling to learn, so there was rarely co-ordinated planning between neighbouring boards. When areas were granted extended open seasons they usually lasted for three months but doubtful cases received very short extensions. Wilcannia and Milparinka pastures protection boards were persistent in their demands for the lifting of all restrictions, but despite pressure from the Pastoralists' Union and local parliamentarians some closed season was retained.

The petitions break down the following way: one quarter from boards that represented large pastoral holdings, one quarter from eastern boards and Farmers and Settlers' Associations that spoke for smaller landholders, and one half from individuals. An example of the last is the letter of a trapper: 'Now that thousands of people in Australia are making a living at the game, some parasites are weeping salt tears because they cannot get these people of the bush and freedom to work for them ... There never has been any complaints from parasites about the squatter running his poison cart'.⁴² The two most consistent supporters of such petitions were Robert Scobie, a leather merchant and member for the Murray, and William Millard, representing Bega, who had been a tannery owner in Wollongong.⁴³ There is no indication that any particular politician or party received a favoured hearing, but the surviving files only cover the years 1910 to 1917, the period of the

42 Fredericks to Meehan MLA, 1912, ML 5250.

43 ADB files.

McGowen and Holman Labor Governments, so broad, inter-party comparisons cannot be drawn. During these years only one decision was made that strongly suggests political pressure had been applied to the department.

In 1915 the government minuted an open season of two months in the four electorates of Gwydir, Namoi, Cobar and Murray. For ease of administration, decisions were usually made on the basis of pastures protection board districts, not electorates. The department had already rejected applications from these areas and an internal memorandum asked the Permanent Secretary whether officers should delay action while they sought the customary police reports.⁴⁴ They were instructed to carry out the Minister's direction but to wire for immediate police reports and to file them for future reference. The Minister was then told that action could not be taken on the basis of electorates and that it would be necessary to lift restrictions throughout the entire central and western divisions and the pastures protection districts of Casino, Tenterfield and Glen Innes. This was an enormous area but the exemption only lasted two months, not the full breeding season. The Labor Government had many problems both within the party and with rural voters over its land policy⁴⁵ but if this

44 Memorandum 9 April 1915, ML 5331.

45 The best terse summary is in Hughes & Graham, Australian Government and Politics, p. 64.

move was a bid for country votes in a possible conscription-induced election in 1916 it was a very devious piece of work of even more doubtful effectiveness. It was more likely to have been an ill-conceived response to poor rains and war-time shortages of netting and labour.

The files reveal a surprising degree of environmental awareness. The department decided that, provided the promise of good grass was borne out, total protection would be reimposed for 1917 to ensure that breeding stocks of marsupials recovered in all areas.⁴⁶ There were also many sympathetic reports from graziers and some pastures protection boards. In 1915 the Coonabarabran board wrote opposing the request from some local men for an extended open season. The board unanimously resolved that 'if the kangaroos are allowed to be destroyed during that period they will very soon be wiped out altogether'.⁴⁷ Condobolin landholders in 1913 told the police that they opposed the shooting of kangaroos and were willing to protect them on their properties.⁴⁸ Some of the police felt even more strongly. Constable Vizzard of Wannaring said 'it is a pity it [the district] was not set aside in the first instance as a National Reserve for Marsupials'.⁴⁹

46 Memorandum 8 December 1916, ML 5331.

47 Kangaroo Protection, 15 June 1915, ML 5331.

48 Ugarie District 29 March 1913, ML 5250 (follows a similar report 15 March 1913).

49 Wannaring, 7 March 1914, ML 5331.

In 1911, 600,000 wallabies and kangaroos were scalped. By 1915 this had fallen to about 30,000. In 1916 it was around 9,000 and in 1918 just over 5,000.⁵⁰ In 1918 the Native Birds and Animals Protection Act changed the format of the law so that the schedule referred to animals and birds which were not protected, instead of the other way around. Kangaroos were not listed but five kinds of wallabies remained vermin.⁵¹ The changes prompted little debate. Whereas most pastures protection boards continued to offer dingo bounties even when no scalps were forthcoming, wallaby bounties were offered occasionally and by a limited number of boards, which suggests there was no great passion to exterminate them.⁵² It is hard to find out how frequently protection was lifted on kangaroos during the 1920s because the notices were only printed in the Government Gazettes, but although skin hunters were not put out of business, the collected pastures protection board balance sheets, held in the New South Wales State Archives, show that the boards were no longer offering bonuses. Whether this indicates a genuine change of attitude must await a proper study of the development of conservation in Australia.

50 NSWPP, 1912-13 (2), I, 158 Department of Agriculture Annual Report; 1915-16, I, 165; 1916, I, 40; 1918, I, 93.

51 Birds and Animals Protection Act, 1918 No. 21, Schedule 2.

52 Pastures Protection Board Annual Balance Sheets 1920-1930, New South Wales State Archives 3/3547. Until 1934 they were also printed in full in the Government Gazettes but not as a group or at the same time every year, so they are tedious to locate.

It may be more a result of the fall in numbers, the efficiency of commercial hunters or changes in the financial priorities of the boards.⁵³ Whatever the reason, and whatever the extent of non-bounty killing that continued, the virtual ending of the bounty system on these animals makes the policy adopted by the boards towards the wombat rather perplexing.

The wombat was included in the 1903 schedule of protected animals but on 18 March 1904 an open season was declared in Wee Jasper on the southern tablelands, and on 17 January 1905 wombats lost their protected status throughout the state.⁵⁴ In 1918 they were put on the vermin schedule. Yet wombat skin had no commercial value and there were only two passing references to them in the 1903 debate. Both were made in the Legislative Council and both relied on hearsay evidence. Kater told the Council that 'Wombats, of course are harmful, although I must say that, although I have lived in a district where there have been wombats, during the last 20 years I have never seen one of them, therefore it is evident that they must be very scarce'.⁵⁵ A.W. Meeks said that 'one gentleman, from the hilly districts told me, however, that he had found the wombats to be worse

53 Bonus payments were offered on a number of animals including hares, opossums, crows and eagles. Some boards in sheep areas made regular payments for crows while others did not. There was a tendency for boards not heavily committed to large bounty outlays on dingoes and marsupials to pay more for crows but this cannot be taken as a general rule.

54 Government Gazettes, New South Wales.

55 NSWPD, 1903 (2 ser.) II, 3306.

than the rabbits because they burrow below the wire netting, and practically make holes for the rabbits to come through. Whilst many people say they have hardly ever seen a wombat, and that there is no necessity to worry about them, I give that as the absolute experience of a gentleman well known to hon. members'.⁵⁶

Massive killing of wombats had begun in the early 1880s around Deniliquin and by the end of the century they were almost extinct in the district. Deniliquin was one of the first areas of New South Wales to be infested with rabbits and some wire netting was erected between 1883 and 1886. On the other hand Berrima, 137km south-west of Sydney, was killing large numbers of wombats by 1894, and, according to the Lands Department, netting was rarely used in the eastern division at that time.⁵⁷ Berrima paid bounties almost every year until 1926 but until 1909 the board sent annual returns to the Department of Agriculture which described the area as 'lightly affected' with rabbits and gave the main counter-measure as poisoning, not rabbit-proof netting.⁵⁸ Purchases of netting under the assistance schemes were not large. To a lesser extent the same comments apply to the Tamworth Pastures Protection Board, the other consistent bounty paying district. However,

56 Ibid., 3307.

57 NSWV&P, 1894. Annual Reports Department of Lands and Department of Mines and Agriculture, Stock and Brands Branch.

58 Annual Report, Department of Agriculture, 1909,

Tamworth was in the main wombat breeding area and had invested in dingo-proof fencing. Bonus payments began in 1900 when 39 scalps were handed in and rose to 659 the following year. After that they fluctuated from 76 in 1912 to over 2,000 in 1916 and bounties were still being paid in the 1930s.⁵⁹ In other districts little notice was taken of wombats except for occasional campaigns that usually lasted only one season. In 1915 a Bega resident, Moorhead, wrote to William Millard, his MLA, asking for the right to kill kangaroos and wombats in the district. The Colonial Secretary's Department refused the request about kangaroos and noted that there was no protection on wombats anyway, but police reports were still requested. Police Constable Wyndham said he had only seen one wombat in four years and Constable Dunne said there was no native animal problem, only a rabbit menace, and that most settlers favoured protection.⁶⁰

Two factors make the payment of wombat bounties more difficult to explain than those on wild dogs. Wombats dig a few large holes and damage some netted fences but they do not harm stock or devastate pastures. They are also easy to kill. In 1913 the Victorian Lands Department issued an instruction book on vermin destruction which pointed out

59 Annual Reports, Department of Agriculture 1900-1930.

60 Fauna Protection files, Bega, May 1915, ML 5331.

that there was no need to be subtle when setting out to deal with wombats. They needed no 'free food' to allay their suspicions before they would take poisoned baits. They bolted any offerings of maize, apples, quinces or carrots, strychnine and all. They left ample signs of where they lived and they were almost always at home in the day time for the fumigators to eliminate. They bred slowly and blundered readily into traps.⁶¹ If they were very destructive of fences and their holes were a menace why were not landholders willing to deal with them without further incentive?

The Victorian policy does not clarify the picture. Whereas it is hard to find evidence of political pressure being applied in New South Wales, in Victoria, it has been only too obvious, right up until the present. Victorian wombats were not declared vermin until 1904 and no bonuses were paid until 1909. Eastern Victorian farmers waged a strong campaign in the press and the declaration coincided roughly with the extension of wire netting into the difficult mountain parts of the state. However, the bounty was not lifted until 1966, long after the successful introduction of myxomatosis and at a time when the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board inspectors said rabbit-proof fencing had reached a very poor state of repair. In 1977 wombats were taken off the vermin list and protected in western Victoria, but east

61 F. Allan, Vermin Destruction: Recipes and Instructions etc. for poisoning and general information, Department of Lands, Victoria, 1913, pp. 18-19.

of the standard gauge railway line they remain vermin. During the twentieth century New South Wales wombat bounties ranged from 1s 6d to 2s 6d but Victoria paid 5s to 10s per scalp.⁶² The Victorian Lands Department has lost or destroyed the pre-1949 bounty figures but, as the total budgetary allowance of the department for bounty payments was small, it seems unlikely that the scale of killing before 1930 ever reached the post World War II levels.⁶³ The peak tally of the years 1949-68 was 12,327 in 1965-66.⁶⁴

62 NSW Department of Agriculture Annual Reports and Pastures Protection Board Balance Sheets; Victorian information from the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board, supplied November 1978.

63 Victorian expenditure was only divided into expenditure on the destruction of rabbits etc. and wire netting advances. The actual figures are given in Chapter 3. Before 1909 expenditure on rabbit destruction etc. never reached £18,000 p.a. Between 1920 and the passing of the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Act 1923 av. expenditure was about £40,000 and after 1923 it was well over £80,000 p.a. Budget figures never revealed how much of the rabbit destruction amount was spent on other animals but it cannot have been much. The largest bounty outlay was on foxes and even this rarely rated a mention in newspaper reports of shire meetings to discuss vermin control. Maximum government reimbursement amounts were set on dingoes, but not on wombats, presumably because the wombat claims were smaller. No more than seven shires were in a position to claim the full £100 dingo bounty reimbursement which suggests pre 1930 wombat payments were quite low. The only breakdown of bounty expenditure I have found is in VPP, 1918, II, 386; Lands Department Report, Rabbit Destruction.

Rabbit Destruction	£29,931 17s 5d
(including	15,031 17s 7d on crown land)
Fox & wild dog	
subsidy	198 17s 5d.

64 Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board list, supplied 7 November 1978.

The year before that the Towong Shire (central Victoria, near Tallangatta) reacted strongly to the suggestion by one of its councillors that the bounty was unnecessary⁶⁵ and in 1969 the Bairnsdale Shire was still urging landholders to petition the Lands Department⁶⁶ if they thought that they had a wombat problem.

In both states it was rural pressure that put the wombat on the vermin lists and led to the long retention of a very questionable bounty. According to inspectors of the Victorian Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board, the Lands Department had been sceptical about the need to class wombats as vermin for at least as long as they could remember, which meant the 1930s. They said the department had always tended towards the view that the bounty only aided the least efficient farmers and that if energetic steps were taken to counter rabbit infestation there would be no wombat problem. Judging by the areas most involved it was small farmers and struggling mountain property holders who were the ones most concerned to retain the bounty payments. In neither state were wombats a topic of concern in the Legislative Councils, where wealthy rural interests predominated. However, this does not simply show that the less prosperous the farmer the less tolerant he was of any form of economic competition. Small farmers were often only too tolerant of the most

65 Upper Murray and Mitta Herald, 23 January 1964; 30 January 1964.

66 Bairnsdale Advertiser, 25 July 1969, p. 1 story.

damaging pest of all, the rabbit. The skin value of some animals, most noticeably the opossum, probably influenced local opinion about their treatment but this is a different question from actual bounty payments. Although the state governments made rebates to the local authorities, bounty money initially came out of the local vermin rates, and although it may have provided a bit of pocket-money for the local lads most went to men specializing in bounty hunting. It seems likely that the intense feeling against wombats was, as sometimes in the case of the dingo, a result of accumulated frustration. Fencing was a major capital investment and only too prone to damage by trees, stock and general wear and tear. There was no redress for this and little compensation for flood and fire damage. Only the wombat was an easy target for vengeance. The wombat seems also to have lacked readily visible appeal which helped win some protection for the New South Wales kangaroos. Few people actually saw wombats in their natural habitat and so were unaware of what was happening to their numbers.

Official policy on native vermin was more tentative and easily swayed than policy on rabbits, probably because far less money was involved but also because rural feeling often ran very high. Because it was not hard to get rid of native animals on a fenced property, rural feeling never became blunted as happened in the case of rabbit infestation. As a result it was rarely worth the political risk for a government to adopt an opposing line,

particularly as there were no clear party divisions that could be exploited. As was the case with the rabbits, Labor had ties with the skin trade and with the casual labourers who welcomed the bounties. The party also had an ideological objection to laws which seemed designed to give special protection to large landholders, even if these were popular with small holders as well. As it happened, graziers were often hostile to the skin trade, because of incidental stock losses, because of the money that went to casual labourers or because they were not anxious to clear their land of all native animals. Small farmers got caught in the middle. The Country party was growing in strength but it was a multi-sectional body. In New South Wales the intensity of local feeling was masked by the decentralized nature of vermin administration. The struggle took place at the pastures protection board level. In Victoria broader campaigns were needed to get the government to act, and once legislation was passed it was far more difficult to alter than an individual pastures protection board bounty list, which was purely a local matter.

However, the two states are not exactly comparable because in the crucial areas of dingo and marsupial control Victoria had a far smaller problem. Nevertheless, the treatment of these three groups of animals show that there were basic similarities of attitude and that similar groups in the community were most deeply concerned. Although there are some signs that environmental attitudes changed,

at least in the case of kangaroos, on the whole a narrow, emotion-ridden image of their economic self-interest was far more important than any particular view of the way the environment operated in influencing rural attitudes towards native vermin.

CHAPTER 9

The Triumph of Decentralization - New South Wales

1902-1930

Although New South Wales and Victoria responded similarly to the problem of native vermin, the tone and range of the broader vermin and weed debates remained substantially different. The states were neighbours, they shared the same knowledge and similar experiences but their policies followed the divergent lines indicated in the 1890s. In the years between the creation of the commonwealth and the depression both states had to cope with increasingly serious noxious weed infestation, the need for large-scale government assistance for fencing and an entrenched body of support for the rabbit trade. The range of policy options was small and the establishment of federal government forced all the states to look afresh, often jealously, at their own areas of political responsibility. Nevertheless, historical differences in social and political development proved more influential on policy formation than economic and ecological similarities.

The passage of the 1902 Pastures Protection Act in New South Wales did not mean that divisions between large and small landholders were ended, or that there was agreement about the best way of administering vermin and

weed control. On the contrary, as was pointed out in chapter seven, the emergence of more clearly defined political parties had accentuated many old differences and it was not long before these led to serious challenges to the new act.

The first came from the Farmers' and Settlers' Association. It was led in parliament by Eden George, the Liberal member for Ashburnham. He moved that clause 49 of the Pastures Protection Act, which stated that it was the duty of every owner or occupier 'to suppress and destroy by all lawful means at his own cost all rabbits and noxious animals to the satisfaction of the boards', should be amended by the omission of the last six words.¹ Numerous examples were given of small farmers who had expended large sums on poison but who were still fined because some rabbits survived. Well attended meetings of selectors in the Belubula and Lachlan electorates, held by Thomas Waddell (Liberal) and A.J. Kelly (Labor) respectively, had argued that it was unfair that the pastures protection board directors were both judge and jury in such cases.²

Even some adamant supporters of the principle of control by the boards conceded that the bench needed

1 NSWPD, 1904 (2 ser.), 16, 1166.

2 Ibid, 1167.

more guidance in deciding whether reasonable efforts at rabbit control had been made by those charged, but they insisted that, if the act was not to become a dead-letter, boards had to retain the right to define the kind of work needed to clear an area.³ After much discussion outside parliament James Ashton, Minister for Lands in Carruthers' Liberal-Reform government, found a compromise. The words to which selectors objected were replaced by the fuller definition 'in accordance with the requirements of the boards, as specified in the provisions of section 52 of the said principal Act'. Under clause 52 the boards could gazette the names of landholders with infested properties, specify the measures to be used and stipulate the time allowed. If charges were laid later the magistrates could hear a defence case based on the actual work done.

The next challenge to control by the boards was less overt but far more serious. Once again large and small landholders tended to take opposing sides. In June 1905 Carruthers introduced his Local Government (Shires) bill. When this was combined the following year with the Local Government Extension bill, which extended the provisions of the Shires Act to municipalities, New South Wales at last had a system of state-wide local government. Neither act referred to the pastures protection boards but both made provision for the new shires and municipalities

3 PR, 16 November 1904, pp. 712-13.

to undertake the work of vermin and weed control. Early in 1905 Carruthers met with some rural representatives and asked them to discuss the bill, but because the boards were not specifically named, Henry Kater claimed that this aspect of the legislation was not properly appreciated. In a speech not calculated to please the Farmers and Settlers' Association, Kater described some of the rural delegates who favoured giving pest control powers to the shires as 'country bumpkins', men who were obviously under the misapprehension that they would escape taxation by the transfer of authority.⁴

The pastures protection board defence campaign was poorly organized, possibly because attention had been concentrated on arranging the Danysz experiment and the implications of the legislation had not been realized till very late.⁵ The 1906 measure met a more organized pastoral response. Kater again objected to the transfer of pastures protection board pest control functions to the municipalities. After much sensible discussion a compromise was reached whereby the municipalities were given the authority to deal with noxious animals not listed in the board schedules.⁶ This meant that they could deal with town rats, which were of no interest to the stock-owners, but the boards retained their existing powers. When the consolidating act was passed in 1906 it included the compromise

4 NSWPD, 1905 (2 ser.), 21, 4049.

5 ANUA, J.A. Gunn papers, 55/2. Letter to Kater.

6 NSWPD, 1906 (2 ser.) 25, 3943-9.

decision had been reached.¹⁵ Next year the same question was repeated by three Farmers and Settlers' representatives and one Labor man. It elicited the terse reply that Treasury was considering the matter.¹⁶ With the return of good seasons after 1902 the rabbit population had again exploded and crops as well as pasture were being destroyed. To the dismay of landholders Lysaght had increased the price of its wire netting to £40 per mile.¹⁷ Struggling selectors who had borrowed under the 1899 Advances to Settlers Act to tide them over the bad years at the turn of the century were already mortgaged and could not obtain more credit. Strong pressure from large and small landholders and from many members of the Labor party, who were backing their colleagues in the rabbit-ridden Lachlan, Macquarie and Cobar seats, could no longer be resisted, particularly at a time when the Lands Department was so publicly discredited.

Under the 1906 Pastures Protection Amendment Act the state at last followed the Victorian example and became directly involved in the purchase and distribution of wire netting.¹⁸ Advances could be made to individuals through the boards for terms of up to 20 years, without the consent of existing mortgage holders, and the cost of

15 Ibid., 1904, 17, 2250.

16 Ibid., 1905 (2 ser.), 18, 1958 (Throwes); 2279 (Waddell); 3718 (McLaurin); 4080 (Eden George).

17 Ibid., 1905, 20, 2383-95. Adjournment debate.

18 Ibid., 1906 (2 ser.), 24, 3225 ff.

agreement⁷ but, as Larcombe has pointed out, the possibility of the growth of pastures protection board authority had been severely limited.⁸ Although Carruthers believed that local government would develop best if it was treated as 'a growing child' and not overloaded with difficult tasks from its inception, the broad delineation of tax powers and areas of authority gave excellent scope for future development.⁹

The boards did not put up a strong fight for the right to deal with noxious weeds, probably because of the known difficulties and expense, and because, as was said before, attention was currently focused on rabbit control.¹⁰ However, in the 1920s noxious weed policy was to become a point of friction and rivalry between the boards and local government bodies and it remains so to the present.¹¹ Whereas in Victoria the one authority was responsible for the destruction of noxious animals and the weeds that often provide their harbour, New South Wales set up a divided system of control and has maintained it, despite seventy years of wrangling. The boards drew their strength from more than twenty years of existence and influential, fairly united sectional support; the new local

7 1906 Local Government Act, 6 Ed. VII No. 56.

8 Larcombe, Local Government, p. 242.

9 Ibid., p. 276.

10 PR, 15 August 1906, p. 486.

11 Larcombe, p. 242.

government authorities had behind them the weight of the government's determination to make local government a success, and the well-known rural desire for more decentralized administration. As so often happens, the logical basis of the division of powers soon became far less important than the emotional preferences and vested interests of those involved in the two systems.

In 1906 Ashton assured the convention of the pastures protection boards that it was not the government's intention to hand over their work to the shires, and he implied that an amendment to the Pastures Protection Act would soon be introduced to extend some aspects of their authority.¹² Amid the controversy surrounding the royal commission into the administration of the Lands Department, and the Crick-Willis trial for extortion, an amendment act was passed.

Despite the promise made in the 1902 act about state aid for fencing, it was not until 1906 that money was allocated for this purpose. In 1904 Ashton said that the matter was being considered.¹³ Later the same year a Labor member, G.A. Jones, was told by the minister that a report 'not as exhaustive as I should like' had been received and was being studied.¹⁴ Two months later no

12 PR, 15 August 1906, p. 486.

13 NSWPD, 1904 (2 ser.), 15, 590.

14 Ibid., 1904, 16, 1395.

the netting, plus six per cent interest, became a first charge on the land.¹⁹ Three-quarters of a group of small landholders in a suitable fencing unit could compel the unwilling remainder to agree to build a ring fence, provided that the fence did not subdivide any individual's holding. There were also a number of clauses which pleased the larger pastoralists. As Alison had hoped would happen,²⁰ the Lands Department gave up its right to appoint a chairman to each board. Instead membership was enlarged to eight directors, who were also empowered to act as inspectors, and repayment of the old sheep board debts to the Treasury was cancelled, on condition that the boards allocated that money to rabbit destruction. The act was well received. Within the Assembly the Labor members and those speaking for the small landholders approved of the fencing provisions and the pastoralists were pleased at the increased autonomy of the boards.

After 1905 all parties seemed committed to the concept of direct government assistance for private fencing but it is not easy to trace the financial details of the policy. The vote was hidden away under unlikely headings in the estimates²¹ and most relevant departmental files have

19 Because of faulty drafting the legal situation was not altogether clear. This was one of the points clarified in the subsequent minor amendment acts eg 1918.

20 See Chapter 7, p.249, Pastures Protection Act 1902 debate.

21 In 1906-7 it came under Public Works and other services to be provided out of The Public Works Fund. It was never listed under either the Lands or Agriculture Departmental votes.

been lost or destroyed. Stead uncovered what he thought were the total amounts allocated in the budgets between 1905 and 1926.²² They came to £450,000. With this sum the governments had purchased netting to the value of £762,000. This sounds like very clever buying, and indeed bulk purchasing was economical, but the enhanced value was due to the re-advancement of money repaid from earlier loans.²³ However, when the budget estimates are compared with the distribution of annual loan expenditure, certain discrepancies appear. Either the loan allocations were not fully taken up, or the accounting system was in some way incomplete.²⁴ As the pastures protection boards had

22 Stead, *Rabbit Menace Inquiry*, p. 104.

23 *NSW Year Book*, 1927-28, p. 648. By this time the value of netting supplied was put at £863,768.

24	Year	Annual Loan Expenditure	Budget Vote	Year	Annual Loan Expenditure	Budget Vote
	£	£		£	£	
	1905	-	50,000	1918	2,452	-
	1906	-	50,000	1919	7,206	10,000
	1907	25,733	30,000	1920	26,187	50,000
	1908	9,531	-	1921	43,568	20,000
	1909	13,609	-	1922	6,307	200,000
	1910	23,246	-	1923	39,514	-
	1911	865	-	1924	62,179	-
	1912	210	-	1925	60,000	30,000
	1913	3,012	-	1926	40,000	-
	1914	2,318	-	1927	10,000	-
	1915	174	10,000	1928	37,500	-
	1916	5,733	-	1929	30,500	-
	1917	3,918	-	1930	-	-

Sources: D. Stead, *Rabbit Menace Inquiry*, p. 104;
Statistical Register of NSW.

to be sure of adequate mortgage security before they supplied netting, the former explanation is likely. It is also supported by the criticism made by the state of the 1923 commonwealth offer of fencing loans. The government said that there were funds already in hand.²⁵ The tables of pastures protection board wire netting purchases, printed in the annual reports of the Lands Department, provide additional evidence. They are not completely reliable because they were based on returns from the boards, which were not always up to date and did not clearly distinguish between orders placed and netting received, but the value of annual purchases corresponds more nearly with the figures given in the loan allocation than in the estimates.

Some of the departmental wire netting registers have survived, but they are very muddled. Every letter from a board involved at least three entries in the ledger: application, title search, decision and often an appeal. They are far more useful for revealing the extent to which rabbit afflicted boards differed in their attitudes toward fencing than for giving a clear picture of how much wire was sold.²⁶

The differences between the budget estimates

25 See Chapter 10, p.384 ff.

26 NSWA, Wire netting registers and ledgers, 3/2950-6. An incomplete set 1906-1930.

and the loan allocation figures are important. If the budget estimates alone are considered it appears that there was a substantial difference between the policies of the non-Labor governments to 1910 and the Labor and Nationalist governments 1910 to 1921. These differences largely disappear if the loan allocation figures are accepted as giving a more accurate indication of what was happening. Between 1907 and 1919 £150,000 had been set aside but only £98,000 had been taken up, and presumably loan repayments should be added to the sum available. Therefore there was no need for Labor to continue making large allowances for fencing in the estimates, and during the war years and for some time afterwards, wire netting was almost unprocurable, so again there was no point in making large grants, or even in relaxing the terms.

Opposition to the fencing provisions focused on the administrative authority, the pastures protection boards, not the principle of government aid. Initially it was expressed in the familiar terms of large versus small landholders. The loudest voices were in the Labor party. William Dunn, who became Minister for Agriculture under Storey in 1920, had many supporters when he described the boards as 'an excrescence' and added that 'experience does not bear out the contention that men are elected for their special knowledge'.²⁷ The Pastoral Review published an

27 NSWPD, 1914 (2 ser.), 54, 991. Supply debate.

article admitting that many newspapers considered that the boards were 'bodies that meet to discuss who is the best man to down for not destroying noxious animals',²⁸ and in 1909 the annual conference of the Farmers and Settlers' Association passed a motion calling for the transfer of functions from the boards to the shires, on the grounds of economy, efficiency and fairer treatment of all.²⁹

In the early 1890s the emerging Labor party had a fairly close relationship with the new, small settlers' organizations, but by the end of the decade divisions between the Labor party and the Farmers and Settlers' Association were clear. The Association rejected the Labor land policy based on leasehold rather than freehold. More generally, the Association disliked the idea of a party pledge and labelled Labor's centralized style of administration as 'socialism' and therefore undesirable.³⁰ Many individual farmers continued to vote for Labor candidates although the Association sponsored its own, who, if elected, sat with the Liberals. After 1915 the Association joined with the Progressive party of the ex-Labor minister, George Beeby.³¹

28 PR, 15 July 1912, p. 462.

29 PR, 16 August 1909, p. 618. (Reprint from the Farmer and Settler).

30 U. Ellis, The Country Party - A Political and Social History of the Party in New South Wales, Melbourne, 1958, p. 23.

31 Graham, The Australian Country Party, p. 61.
Ellis, The Country Party, p. 18.

While the divisions between the small settlers' organizations and the Labor party were deepening, a more gradual change was taking place in the political relationship between the large and small landholders. This became apparent after the Labor party took office in 1910. John Treflé, Minister for Agriculture, who had been a member of the Farmers and Settlers' Association until in 1905 he found it incompatible with his political convictions, made it clear that he intended to abolish the pastures protection boards and transfer their powers to the shires.³² Whereas the Association had voted for just that thing in 1909, in 1911 opinion was no longer so definite. It was decided to favour the move if a majority of stock-ratepayers voted for it. The test was never made because, to Treflé's surprise, the Shires opposed the transfer on the grounds that they were not ready to cope with the extra work.³³ Instead of abolishing the boards the Labor government actually strengthened them through the 1912 Pastures Protection Board Amendment Act. Although it was mainly a consolidating act it incorporated several important changes. Stock inspectors (who in most areas exercised rabbit control functions) remained responsible to the minister but their services were more observed by the local boards. The boards could also appoint rabbit inspectors who were completely under their control. The Farmers and Settlers' Association did not object and in 1919 the

32 Land, 3 May 1912.

33 Ibid., 17 May 1912.

Graziers' Association, united with the Farmers and Settlers' Association while retaining its own administrative structure. Nevertheless, the divisions between large and small landholders were stronger than a brief examination of the political superstructure suggests. Shared anxiety about Labor policy provided some common ground but not a positive basis on which to build. A better unifying factor emerged during the war years when smaller graziers became more influential in the Pastoralists' Union (which became the Graziers' Association in 1916). However, the marriage remained an uneasy one, and vermin and weed policy struck at some of its most tender points.

Having won a second chance in 1902 to show what they could do against the rabbits, many pastures protection boards put considerable money and energy into the fight in the years leading up to the outbreak of war. This burst of renewed zeal no doubt helped to consolidate their position, but it was not always well directed. It found its main expression in the promotion of a new series of experiments into the spread of a rabbit disease. The investigation was a praiseworthy venture but the refusal of many landholders to accept the negative findings resulted in much bitterness and disillusionment. Faith in the miraculous scientific solution had not waned. On the contrary, the suspicion that Pasteur and his chicken cholera microbes had been shabbily, not to say improperly, treated by the government, had strengthened. Faced with

need to show some positive achievements the pastoralists desperately wanted a cheap panacea, and once again they looked to foreign experts.

The sales representative of the Pasteur Vaccine Company, a commercial enterprise set up to market preparations discovered by the Institute Pasteur, spoke to R.G. Casey, of Goldsborough Mort, and A.W. Pearse of the Pastoral Review about the work of Dr Jean Danysz, a Polish scientist working for the institute, who had had success with the propagation of rat and mice viruses. Sorby implied that his company might be interested in supplying similar microbes against rabbits.³⁴ The Pasteur Vaccine Company repudiated his action, because the organization was purely interested in distribution, not development, but the idea had been taken up by Ashton, the Minister for Lands.³⁵ He corresponded with Danysz without coming to any agreement. The Council of Advice, which represented the combined pastures protection boards, was not satisfied with the result. There was pastoral suspicion that the government was not whole-heartedly fostering the plan. In December 1905 the government allowed the Council of Advice to take up negotiation with Danysz, on condition that the pastoralists paid all expenses, abided by all safeguards suggested and conducted any tests on an island.

The Council of Advice estimated that it would

34 PR, 15 June 1906, p. 285.

35 Ibid., 16 July 1906, p. 286.

need £15,000. About £12,000 was raised by subscription in the first year.³⁶ William Alison was the first chairman of the organizing committee but he soon stood down and John Gunn took over. The other members comprised two more pastoralists, three representatives of rural finance houses, two businessmen and a solicitor.³⁷ Because of his work on anthrax vaccine and his partnership with McGarvie Smith, Gunn was a good choice as organizer. As he explained to the editor of the Stock and Station Journal, he did not believe in miracles and he thought that Danysz' salary of £600 per month was 'preposterous' but he was prepared to work for the scheme because there was a chance of finding a disease that would reduce the rabbit population even if it was most unlikely to eliminate it.³⁸ He did not share the common prejudice against Australian scientists and welcomed the government decision that Danysz should conduct his experiments in collaboration with Dr F. Tidswell, the state government bacteriologist, who shortly afterwards accepted a similar post with the federal government.

While the negotiations were going on there was a flood of letters and articles opposing the move from those making money out of the rabbit trade and from a number

36 Ibid., 15 June 1906, p. 286.

37 Ibid., 15 February 1906, p. 961. Membership list: W. Alison, J.A. Gunn, P. Oakden, F. Bacon, A.F. McKenzie, J. Kidd (AML&F), E.J. McKenzie (Goldsborough Mort), W.F. Laway (N.Z. Loan), F. Yarwood (Hon. Sec), Capt. A.W. Pearse.

38 ANUA, J.A. Gunn papers, 55/2. 3 May 1906.

of Labor leagues.³⁹ In a vigorous counter-attack Gunn created a flurry by claiming that poisoned rabbits and rabbits infected with hydatids were being sold on the Sydney market.⁴⁰ Pastoral suspicion of the government's intentions was heightened when William Morris Hughes carried a motion in federal parliament deploring the use of microbes against rabbits.⁴¹ He claimed that rabbits were the last resort of the poor and unemployed. Gunn believed that the adverse publicity might provoke federal authorities to refuse permission for Danysz to bring into Australia his pasteurella microbes, which produced a septicaemic hemorrhage in rabbits. However, he was less worried about this possibility than his colleagues because, as he wrote to James Kidd, 'a straight out refusal we can meet by trying local diseases'.⁴² As he suspected, and Tidswell was to confirm, Danysz' infection already existed among Australian rabbits. He was almost disappointed when the federal government permitted the experiments to take place on Broughton Island. He foresaw that 'the big fight will be to get him [Danysz] on the mainland if successful on Broughton Island', and he thought that this struggle might have been avoided had only local diseases been used.⁴³

39 Ibid., 55/1 Press cuttings; PR, 15 March 1906.

40 SMH, 18 July 1906; Argus, 16 July 1906; Daily Telegraph, 17 July, 1906.

41 CPD, 1906, 31, 206.

42 ANUA, J.A. Gunn papers, 55/2. 5 October 1906.

43 Ibid., 12 October 1906. Gunn to Kidd.

The initial tests were conducted in cages on the island and then in 20 acres of 'natural conditions'. Both the state and federal governments received a number of reports.⁴⁴ The scientists tested not only Danysz' pasteurella but also the local Yalgogrin*, Gundagai and Picton microbes. They discovered that the strength of the virus could be increased, and the more densely packed the rabbits, the more effective the disease. When the experiments were conducted in the large paddock the viruses did not appreciably diminish the rabbit population. Danysz claimed that different climatic factors and freedom from the antiseptic qualities of sea air might produce more promising results on the mainland. Tidswell made no such forecast.

The pastoralists were not willing to let the matter rest. They demanded that the experiments continue on the mainland. Because of the quarantine implications the Broughton Island investigation had been under the control of the federal government so the final decision lay with the commonwealth. The rabbit industry and many Labor supporters remained very hostile to the idea, and Deakin was dependent on Labor support. Partly to avoid a difficult decision a conference of state health authorities was called in 1908 to decide whether the Danysz microbe was

44 Dr Danysz 29 September 1906; 27 April 1907; Dr Tidswell 24 September 1906; 16 November 1907.

* Named after the property on which it was discovered. It was managed for Goldsborough Mort by J.A. Gunn.

identical with the local varieties which had been isolated and whether it was advisable to continue with the experiments. The verdict was that rabbit pasteurella was already present in Australia. It offered no threat to health and no hope of rabbit eradication. If New South Wales wished to continue with the experiments the conference saw no objections to enclosed mainland tests of the Yalgogrin microbe, but it also saw little point to such work.⁴⁵ The report was adopted and it was left to Wade and his Liberal-Reform government to decide what to do.

Gunn's 1908 presidential address to the Council of Advice began and ended with a plea for mainland experiments. He emphasised that 'while it will not sweep the rabbits off the face of the earth, [it] has proved, even amid the adverse conditions of Broughton Island, that it will destroy most of those that eat baits infected with it, and incidentally will spread to a number that have not taken baits'.⁴⁶ Other benefits were that it was harmless to stock and, unlike phosphorous, could not cause bushfires. Danysz was willing to return for another year and the fund still held £3000. The Premier was faced with a dilemma. He told a deputation of pastoralists and representatives of the Farmers and Settlers' Association that he was well aware of the ravages of rabbits but, judging by the reports,

45 A.A. Prime Minister's Department. General Correspondence files. Annual single number series. CRS A2 08/998 Rabbit Virus Conference Report.

46 ANUA, J.A. Gunn papers, 55/1, Chairman's Address 1908.

the only possibility of mainland tests being more effective than tests on the island lay in the impact of different climatic factors. In this case the disease might also prove more dangerous to other creatures.⁴⁷ Bearing in mind that the virus was known to exist already on the mainland, this was a weak argument. The real point of anxiety was explained in an editorial in the Sydney Morning Herald. The deliberate spreading of disease could destroy the rabbit trade while doing nothing to lessen the seriousness of the rabbit problem.⁴⁸ The Age, the Argus, Adelaide Advertiser and Brisbane Courier took the same view. The Daily Telegraph was in favour of further enclosed experiments but did not express an opinion about broader tests.⁴⁹

According to the State Labour Bureau in 1906, there were 16,000 people employed by the rabbit industry and the trade was valued at about £1,000,000 p.a.⁵⁰ No records were kept of domestic sales of fur and flesh and the estimate was probably generous. Export sales for 1908 and 1909 were under £400,000 p.a.⁵¹ This was no compensation for the damage done to the multi-million pound pastoral industry but that was not the point at issue. The government

47 SMH, 26 February 1908.

48 SMH, 28 February 1908.

49 Age, 28 November 1907; Argus, 28 November 1907; Adelaide Advertiser, 22 February 1908; Brisbane Courier, 27 February 1908; Daily Telegraph, 26 February 1908.

50 NSWPP, 1906, I, 1016, Annual Report Director of Labour.

51 PR, 15 May 1917, p. 273.

had to balance the very unlikely prospect of diminishing the rabbit problem by releasing large numbers of infected rabbits and spreading microbe contaminated baits against the almost certain loss of domestic and foreign earnings and increased rural unemployment among a vocal, politically influential section of the community. No doubt local fear of eating diseased rabbits would have eventually subsided, just as had the fear of eating poisoned or hydatid infected rabbits, but a deliberate policy of spreading disease would probably end the export trade. As the commonwealth discovered at the same time, an economic definition of vermin necessitated some very hard political decisions. Wade compromised. He banned mainland tests but set up an experimental facility on Milson Island in association with a Bureau of Microbiology. A chair of Veterinary Science was at last established at Sydney University.

Arguments about the commercial value of rabbits had figured in every rabbit debate in New South Wales and Victoria since 1880. The new factor was the increasingly well organized political backing of the trade. The dispute had always had its political overtones because the exploitation of rabbits was usually linked with hostility to squatters, but the advent of the Labor party had broadened the whole issue. The State Labour Bureau noted in 1906 that rabbiting had made a great difference to the rural work-force. According to the annual meeting of the Pastoralists' Union wages for fencing and tank digging had been forced up 25 per cent, carters were unwilling to 'waste

time' bringing wood to rural towns and some families were earning fl10 to fl2 per week at the business.⁵² In 1910 a Rabbiters' Union was formed and it affiliated with the Australian Workers' Union. The union petitioned the first state Labor government in 1911 to ban the poisoning of rabbits within 15 miles of a railway,⁵³ and the Carcoar branch published a circular which told members that 'you are at the mercy of avaricious landholders, who in many instances demand an exorbitant payment for the right to trap on their holdings, and you are at the mercy of a ring of buyers'.⁵⁴

Graziers were incensed that the social and economic arguments of supporters of the rabbit trade were frequently presented in parliament. Although he was a little more flowery than most, there were many Labor men who agreed with the former miner and lay-preacher, Alfred Edden:

52 Annual Report Director of Labour, 1906, p. 1016.

53 NSWPD, 1911 (2 ser.), 40, 30. The records of the Rabbiters' Union are held in the ANUA, but they are, at present, closed to researchers.
PR, 15 July 1911, pp. 503-4 - claimed the union wanted to prohibit the killing of young rabbits.

54 PR, 15 May 1911, p. 273.

My opinion is that the rabbit has been a benefactor to many people in this country ... Divine Providence has provided us with a blessing in the shape of the rabbit to feed the poor people of this country ... The Almighty has blessed us with a commodity whereby a poor man without capital can go and get a good day's wages and go into Narrandera with a horse and buggy! The Minister put that before the House as if it was a serious calamity. 55

In 1911 a committee was set up to find out whether a combine of large rabbit companies (probably headed by four Victorian firms) was impeding the involvement of small men in the export trade by refusing them freezer space.⁵⁶ The committee never reported but pastoralists sensed a campaign building up against the use of poison. Questions were asked in the Assembly about the effect of poison on bird life and the Pastoral Review printed indignant letters in reply.⁵⁷ In 1914 John Treflé the Labor Minister for Agriculture, told the House that he was taking steps to investigate the deleterious effects arising from rabbit poisoning and in the same session many stories were told of hardships inflicted on small farmers by pastures protection boards insisting on the use of expensive poison carts rather than traps.⁵⁸ The same charges were made again in 1916.⁵⁹

55 NSWPD, 1906 (2 ser.), 23, 1369.

56 Ibid., 1911 (2 ser.), 41, 1203 ff.

57 Ibid., 1909 (2 ser.), 33, 652, Fitzpatrick.

58 Ibid., 1914 (2 ser.), 54, 644, 1022.

59 Ibid., 1916 (2 ser.), 60, 785.

In 1915 the Labor government announced that it intended to set up fish shops in some suburbs and country towns. These shops would also sell rabbits. Despite the wishes of large sections of the party, that rabbits should only be bought direct from trappers, George Black, Minister for Agriculture, explained that, in order to get skinned, wrapped rabbits, the shops had to buy from the big freezer companies. However, to the disgust of opponents of the trade, he added that the government was investigating the possibility of setting up its own freezer works.⁶⁰ The worst fears of the graziers seemed to be confirmed when, in the interests of supplying war-blockaded Britain with cheap meat, and the armed forces with felt hats, the federal government under Hughes commandeered the entire rabbit catch and banned the use of poison within range of freezer works. Neither New South Wales or Victoria officially complied but local relaxation of eradication procedures occurred. In 1919 New South Wales briefly banned the export of skins in the interests of hat manufacturers.⁶¹

Despite the common, long-held belief that the development of a profitable rabbit industry was incompatible with the extermination of rabbits as vermin,⁶² many people

60 Ibid., 1915 (2ser.), 58, 423, 2674.

61 CPD, 1916-17, 61, 11487; PR, 16 April 1917, p. 311; ANUA, E256/85/5002, 31 October 1914. Letters of protest from the Graziers' Assoc. This was a commonwealth, not a state decision but New South Wales did not object.

62 Australasian, 21 July 1883, p. 90, and Chapters 4 and 5.

continued to hold the opinion that, while the rabbits existed, it was only sensible to exploit them. Even Stead's rabbit inquiry did not consider banning all trade in rabbit products (later called 'decommercialization') and although the investigation into fur farming pointed out that income from rabbit sales sapped the will of small farmers to get rid of them, it did not recommend an end to all rabbit trading.⁶³ Admittedly by the late 1920s decommercialization would have been very difficult, not just because of the strength of the rabbit lobby but also for constitutional reasons. As Sawyer has pointed out, section 92 of the constitution, guaranteeing freedom of trade between the states, does not necessarily preclude the states from forbidding trade in rabbit products, but it does raise some problems unless all states agree. On the other hand, use could be made of health and animal cruelty laws to achieve much the same result.⁶⁴ The matter was never tested in Australia. No organization campaigned for the idea and serious discussion did not take place until the late 1950s. By then myxomatosis had drastically affected the carcass trade, the slump in the hatting industry had begun, and, after ten years of gradually introduced restrictions, New Zealand in 1957 had banned all

63 Committee of Investigation into Fur Farming, New South Wales Department of Agriculture 1929, NSWA 8/2018.

64 G. Sawyer, 'Rabbits, the Law and The Constitution', A. Barnard (ed.), The Simple Fleece: Studies in the Australian Wool Industry, Melbourne, 1962, p. 256-7.

trade in rabbit products.⁶⁵

The Graziers' Association in the 1920s was officially opposed to the rabbit trade but some boards still supported it. In 1922 the Inverell Pastures Protection Board asked the Minister to introduce a price stabilization scheme for rabbit skins.⁶⁶ On the other hand, in the same year the Young Board opposed the application of a group of local residents to ban the use of poison because a freezers works costing £6,000 and benefitting 300 people had been built in the town.⁶⁷ As in earlier years the main division was between large and small landholders. It was most clearly expressed when the proposal to introduce commercial fur farming of angora and chinchilla rabbits was under consideration. The Bavin Nationalist-Country coalition appointed a committee of investigation in February 1928. Five of the 12 members were pastoralists.⁶⁸ The majority

65 B.V. Fennessy, 'Rabbits - Commercialisation and de-Commercialisation', Wildlife Survey Section, CSIRO, 1957, (typescript).

66 Stead, Rabbit Menace Inquiry, p. 639. The same point was raised in The Report of the Special Committee on Rabbit Destruction set up by The Graziers' Association in 1924, but it was not endorsed.

67 Stead, p. 627.

68 Fur Farming Report, Membership list taken from a Department of Agriculture Minute for Cabinet 27 February 1929.
F.B. Fleming (Sheep-breeders' Assoc.), A.F. Bassett-Hull (Taronga Park Zoo Trust), A.S. le Souef (Taronga Park Zoo Trust), E. Binnie (Stockowners' Assoc.), E. Killen (PPB Council of Advice), M.P. Dunlop (Primary Producers' Union), H.W. Johnston (Chief Secretary's Dept.), D.G. Stead (Chief Secretary's Dept.), E.E. Martin (Graziers' Assoc.), M. Henry (Dept. of Agriculture), S. Smith jnr. (Dept. of Agriculture).

report opposed fur farming. Several minority reports favouring the plan were signed by four non-pastoral members, including David Stead and the Ministry of Agriculture officials. On the basis of the minority report the government went ahead with its negotiations with the federal government. In October 1929 a combined delegation of primary producers' organizations waited on the commonwealth Minister for Health, to oppose relaxation of quarantine restrictions on the importation of rabbits.⁶⁹ However, at its last general meeting the Farmers and Settlers' Association had voted 59 to 57 in favour of fur farming. No one spoke to the motion from Dubbo members opposing the introduction of fancy rabbits, perhaps because its supporters expected it to pass easily. Those in favour of fur farming spoke of the value of a labour intensive industry in rural areas and the advantages of providing small farmers with 'a second string to their bow'.⁷⁰ Although the graziers had maintained a united front throughout the investigation the committee evidence showed that general rural opinion was not so united.⁷¹

Because the whole issue hinged on the federal authorities permitting the importation of breeding stock, the matter is treated more fully in the next chapter, but it is interesting that, despite the strength of grazier

69 ANUA Graziers' Assoc., E 256/232/mm 38; Country Life, 13 August 1929.

70 Ibid.

71 PR, 16 January 1928, p. 6; 16 April, p. 317; 16 August, p. 733; 15 September, p. 836.

opposition and the state rejection of the findings of the majority report, the campaign against fur farming never reached the emotional pitch of the fight to ban the Alsatian dog, which took place at the same time.⁷² Newspapers were flooded with stories culled from all around the world of ferocious attacks on humans and animals. Public meetings were organized and a degree of hysteria was whipped up which, judging by the prominence still given by newspapers to the attacks of this particular breed, has never completely subsided. Why the danger of a dingo-Alsatian cross was seen as so much greater than the cross of a dingo with an airedale, greyhound, or any other large hunting dog was never explained. Obviously, the Alsatian's wolf-like look was against it, and possibly its German origins.

The rights and wrongs of the actual arguments are of little importance. The campaign's significance lies in its success. The matter was discussed at the Interstate Conference of Ministers of Agriculture in 1929.⁷³ New South Wales dog shows bowed to the pressure and stopped judging the breed and in June future imports were banned and in rural areas the dogs had to be sterilized. Although the dingo problem was of immediate concern to few, the agitation had led to the passage of a new type of law that affected the whole state. There can be no direct comparison

72 ANUA Graziers' Assoc., E256/177/DC4; 222/DC4; 245/DC4 (1928-1929).

73 Ibid., E256/220/DC4.

with the opposition to the rabbit trade, or the breeding of fur-bearing rabbits, because the anti-Alsatian battle did not have to counter a strong financial interest group; but the energy, intensity and single-mindedness of the campaign make a striking contrast with the rather tired arguments used against the commercial utilization of rabbits. It is another indication of the blunting effect of over-familiarity with a long, drawn-out struggle. It also illustrates how difficult it was to arouse great public fervour when fur farming advocates could publish lovely pictures of big, white, fluffy rabbits, quite unlike their scruffy wild relatives. These pictures reinforced the traditional image of the rabbit as a delightful, harmless animal.

However, despite the general lack of success experienced by those in New South Wales who opposed the rabbit trade, the issue was still far more controversial than in Victoria. The Argus published a long series of articles on the rabbit fur industry⁷⁴ and the Age gave the matter similar publicity, but debate about the trade was not a regular feature in the Victorian press nor did it often figure in parliamentary debates, although the four biggest processing companies had their headquarters in Melbourne. In part these differences may reflect differences in scale, but given the much smaller size of Victoria this

74 Argus, 25 May 1929, p. 19; 28 May, p. 16; 14 June p. 14; 21 June, p. 16; 24 June, p. 7; 23 August, 1929, p. 18; 11 September 1929, p. 12.

is questionable.⁷⁵

It was also claimed that Victorian trappers could make a bigger impression on the rabbit population in an area because more properties were netted and the paddocks were smaller.

75 Value of the New South Wales and Victorian Rabbit export trade.

Year	<u>New South Wales</u>		<u>Victoria</u>	
	Skins	Carcasses	Skins	Carcasses
1910	£ 329,000	£407,000	£200,000	£ 69,000
1911	297,000	331,000	157,000	69,000
1912	319,000	252,000	222,000	57,000
1913	311,000	374,000	271,000	108,000
1914	156,000	393,000	69,000	128,000
1915	212,000	608,000	44,000	91,000
1916	392,000	760,000	35,000	112,000
1917	1,037,000	670,000	109,000	280,000
1918	1,104,000	222,000	135,000	87,000
1919	2,702,000	538,000	780,000	225,000
1920	609,000	302,000	327,000	131,000
1921	559,000	372,000	202,000	35,000
1922	1,702,000	309,000	238,000	10,000
1923	1,044,000	303,000	282,000	8,000
1924	2,112,000	300,000	350,000	5,000
1925	2,271,000	340,000	579,000	54,000
1926	2,437,000	258,000	381,000	45,000
1927	1,887,000	263,000	550,000	45,000
1928	1,949,000	193,000	605,000	136,000
1929	1,042,000	214,000	441,000	124,000

Source: L.J. Dunn. "The Rabbit Industry: an Economic Survey 1904-1947", Dept. of Economics and Commerce, University of Tasmania, 1948, Typescript, ANL, Appendix A, Tables 2 and 4.

The difficulties experienced by New South Wales graziers with very large paddocks who tried to utilize trappers to the best advantage are illustrated by the Peel River Company file of rabbit contracts.⁷⁶ The contracts ran to about 20 clauses and specified where the trappers were to operate, what supervision would be imposed, how the count would be conducted and what penalty clauses would be invoked in the event of unsatisfactory work. Under these conditions Messrs Bennett and Treacy killed 30,000 rabbits in a 1,200 acre paddock in 1929, and another 2,717 when they returned four months later to work over the same ground and another enclosure totalling 2,400 acres. Very few owners went to this much trouble.

Nevertheless, geographic differences between the states are not enough to explain the level of hostility directed at the New South Wales rabbit trade. Notice must be taken of the lesser amount of social tension in rural Victoria and the more even distribution of financial benefits from the rabbit trade. The heart of the Victorian trapping industry was the Western District. Well known grazing families permitted trapping as did their smaller neighbours. Although New South Wales had far more local canning and freezing works than Victoria, there were many parts of the state which were beyond the range of trappers for the meat trade. In Victoria the railways could bring most carcasses

76 ANUA, Peel River Company, Rabbit Contracts, 128/22/3.

to Melbourne for freezing.

New South Wales graziers obviously also felt far more threatened than their Victorian counterparts and this was a product of the differing social and political developments in the two states. Large and small landholders were far more united in Victoria. The more rapid development of selection had forestalled much of the bitterness of the squatter-selector division and Victorian landholders were more inclined to express resentment at the actions of city politicians than to attack each other.⁷⁷ The Victorian Labor party never achieved a rural foothold as the New South Wales party did, and the Victorian Farmers' Union was a powerful voice in government and a unifying force in rural politics. Until 1930, apart from two very brief interludes, Labor was in office in Victoria only between 20 May 1927 and 22 November 1928.⁷⁸ In New South Wales Labor was the dominant party between 1910 and 1928. Because of the long hostility between organized labour and the pastoralists, the relationship between the traditionally pastoral-dominated pastures protection boards and the successive Labor governments was, at the best uneasy, and generally antagonistic. Pastoral resentment of the rabbit trade as a parasitic industry, profiting at the expense of graziers and corrupting the rural work-force, was coupled with suspicion of the

77 B. Graham, Formation of The Australian Country Party, Canberra, 1966, pp. 66-8.

78 The other two periods were 9 December - 22 December, 1913 (Elmslie); 18 July - 18 November 1924 (Prendergast).

intentions of Labor administrations, avowedly hostile to the interests of large landholders and sympathetic to the claims of rural workers. It was not a situation designed to promote a good working relationship between the central and local vermin control authorities.

While the connections between the main New South Wales rural organizations were becoming closer, at least on the official level, the pastures protection boards remained the target of numerous political attacks. In 1916 John McGirr, Labor member for Yass, who had campaigned on an anti-pastures protection board platform, launched an adjournment debate urging abolition of the boards. He claimed that 'small and genuine farmers of New South Wales were, as a whole totally opposed to these autocratic bodies'.⁷⁹ The local rabbit inspector was a particular source of grievance: 'He is either a broken-down bank manager, who used to give them [squattocracy] an overdraft, or someone who was a "boss" of the Liberal organization the year before... every man who does not vote the way his boss in the pastures protection board votes he sues for not destroying his rabbits'. Thrower, another Labor man, described the boards as 'the squatter protection boards' and said that 'this is simply an organization to keep people in fat billets'.⁸⁰

It remains something of a mystery why the war-time

79 NSWPD, 1916 (2 ser.), 61, 779 ff.

80 Ibid., 781.

Labor governments did not abolish the boards and hand their functions over to the shires. The most likely explanation is that the party was too deeply involved with its internal problems, the 1914-16 drought and war-induced shortages to give the necessary time to framing the legislation. Any change would also mean wider general taxation. In the eyes of all governments the boards at least had the virtue of, within set limits, levying their own taxes on a clearly defined section of the population. The Minister for Agriculture in 1916, William Grahame, was not ready to push for change. He said that McGirr had exaggerated the abuses and that while most rural voters favoured reconstitution of the boards any change would have to await a new Local Government Act.⁸¹

For a while it seemed that the Lang Labor government was going to take the final step. William Dunn, Minister for Agriculture, told the 1925 annual conference of the pastures protection boards that the boards would either be abolished or drastically amended.⁸² A commission of inquiry into the rabbit menace that had been set up by the Fuller government in April 1924 under David Stead, an experienced public servant and fisheries naturalist who had conducted two earlier commissions, had its terms of reference extended.⁸³ Stead took nearly two years to make

81 Ibid., 788.

82 PR, 16 October 1925, p. 857.

83 Daily Telegraph, 14 December 1926. (The Commission was proclaimed on 30 April 1925, NSWA).

a thorough investigation. In November 1926, just before Stead presented his findings, Dunn announced to the Labor Caucus that he favoured abolition of the boards and he was told to go ahead, although no recommendations were made about what would replace them. The Graziers' Association complained that if the work was handed over to the shires, stockowners could be out-voted by those with no interest in the industry; if the Department of Agriculture took over it would create a bureaucratically top-heavy system that would be just as unsatisfactory to stockowners.⁸⁴

When Stead's report was received it pleased no one. It was long and detailed. Evidence had been taken from the badly kept, incomplete official records, general correspondence with interested parties, scientific literature, the replies and records of 49 of the 64 pastures protection boards and Stead's own extensive field trips. It added up to a general indictment of the work of governments, boards, settlers and rabbiters. He made 22 recommendations ranging from abolition of the boards, to long, interest-free loans for wire netting, compulsory cost sharing of fencing (including unoccupied crown lands held by various departments) and a levy on all skins and carcasses sold, in order to help pay for eradication. The Pastoral Review predicted that the report would be accepted by the government 'because its policy is to abolish the boards, and, because of its socialistic tendencies, it is possessed of a mania for creating new

84 PR, 16 November 1926, p. 1007.

government departments'.⁸⁵ However, both sides of the House voted against printing the recommendations and only extracts of the report were published. When Stead deposited a complete typescript in the Mitchell Library he appended a letter referring to the 'strong political pressure' that was brought to bear by the rabbit industry and the boards to have the report suppressed.⁸⁶ Whether Lang would have liked to follow the recommendation and appoint a Rabbit Menace Commissioner directly under the Minister of Agriculture, to oversee total rabbit policy, to employ and control inspectors, and to co-ordinate research, was never discussed. The combined opposition was too strong and Treasury objected to the financial implications, particularly of the fencing recommendations. By 1927 Lang was also deep in internal party strife and in October of that year a Nationalist-country party coalition came to power.

In 1923 the Pastoral Review rejoiced that once again there were non-Labor governments in New South Wales and the commonwealth, but the practical effects on vermin policy are hard to find. The budget allocation for wire netting purchases jumped to £200,000, but in terms of actual allocation of loan funds 1921 was a better year than 1923.⁸⁸ Commonwealth-state relationships were not

85 Ibid., 15 January 1927, p. 16.

86 Stead, Rabbit Menace Inquiry, Q632.5S. NSWA Covering letter.

87 PR, 16 February 1923, editorial.

88 See footnote 24.

appreciably improved either. During his premiership Holman had proved difficult when the federal government sought to become involved with the control of noxious weeds, particularly prickly pear, but the Fuller ministry showed it was just as jealous of its rights when the federal government introduced a scheme for large-scale fencing loans, and the Bavin ministry ultimately refused to have anything to do with it.⁸⁹ The Graziers' Association had hoped to find the new Country Party Treasurer, Earle Page sympathetic to their grievances, but when they approached him in July 1923 about sanctioning further mainland tests of Yalgogrin disease he referred them back to the state government, and despite long correspondence there was no change of policy.⁹⁰ Nor did Fuller prove any more innovative or competent than Dooley or Lang when it came to dealing with the noxious weed problem.

The only hopeful sign in the gloomy saga of weed control in the years up to the depression came through the efforts of the federal government in combining and extending the research work of Queensland and New South Wales in the fight against prickly pear. This involved small expenditure on the part of the states and, significantly in the light of previous comments on the slight differences changes of government made on policy, the petty rivalries between the Departments of Lands and Agriculture and between both state

89 See Chapter 10, Section 2.

90 ANUA, Graziers' Association E 256/139/9166.

bodies and the commonwealth, were just as apparent and just as frustrating under non-Labor administrations as under Holman.⁹¹

Some changes were made to the Prickly Pear Act in 1924 but these only concerned lease classifications and rent reductions. While the commonwealth conducted the biological control experiments, the New South Wales Department of Agriculture Experiments Committee, under Dr G. Darnell Smith, concentrated on the effects of poison on the pear. Various compounds of arsenic seemed promising. A typical mixture consisted of 40 pounds of arsenious oxide, 10 pounds of caustic soda and 100 pounds of water, at a total cost of 2s 6d per gallon. It was expensive, and as the Agricultural Gazette warned, almost as an after-thought at the end of the article, 'one disadvantage that applies to all pear treated with poison is that cattle must be fenced off it for a considerable time ... so small an amount as 2½ grains of white arsenic to a man has caused death'.⁹²

Every Graziers' Association and Farmers and Settlers' Association conference in the 1920s passed resolutions calling for action against noxious weeds. As in Victoria the growth of soldier settlement made the problem more urgent. A special conference was held in Sydney in May 1923. It was attended by representatives of the Departments of Agriculture, Lands and Railways and of all

91 See Chapter 10, pp. 360 ff.

92 NSW Agricultural Gazette, 1918, Vol. XXIX, p. 10.

the main rural organizations.⁹³ The second resolution of the meeting called for the creation of a state board or commission to co-ordinate destruction.⁹⁴ An amendment seeking to place full responsibility for weed control in the hands of the pastures protection boards was rejected. Much of the discussion centred on the difficulties of defining a 'noxious weed'. Nobody spoke a good word for prickly pear or St John's Wort, but, as in Victoria, thistles were a different matter. There were also differences between the opinions of graziers and cultivators. No legislation resulted, despite the importance placed on the second motion. Shortly afterwards the Minister for Local Government wrote to the Graziers' Association that it was impracticable to pass any measure compelling the shires to destroy weeds.⁹⁵

Over the next few years some councils did their best to deal with the worst of the weeds but, despite the work of state research projects operating on small budgets, little progress was made, and often good work was nullified by the proximity of careless neighbours. Although all Graziers' Association conferences passed motions urging

93 ANUA, Graziers' Association E/134/8593. Noxious Weed Conference Proceedings.

94 The motion was introduced by the Farmers and Settlers' Association representative, Thorby, later Minister for Agriculture.

95 ANUA, Graziers' Association E/256/226/DD8. Control of Noxious Weed, 1929 file. Summary.

the transfer of weed control from the shires to the boards, there was little discussion of the degree of compulsion or co-ordination that the boards were prepared to exercise if the change took place. One of the few definite resolutions consisted of an attempt to lift all protection on emus, 'although the total extermination of this bird is not asked for', on the grounds that they spread prickly pear.⁹⁶ The government sensibly replied that, if prickly pear was spread in bird droppings, then most birds and stock were probably guilty, and that the emu was at least a great destroyer of insect pests. Such resolutions from the boards do not suggest that they had learned much about weed control.

The boards had also been given the power under the 1918 Pastures Protection Board Amendment Act to levy a rate on travelling stock in the eastern and central divisions, to pay for maintenance and weed control on the travelling stock routes and reserves. The results had not been encouraging. Some boards said that the money was so little it was not worth spending, but there was no agitation to raise the levy or institute a broader tax.⁹⁷ The Lang government voted £1,200 in 1925-26 and 1926-27 for distribution to the shires for assistance to small settlers unable

96 Ibid., E/256/177/DD3, 17 May 1927; Reply 25 May 1927.

97 Ibid., E/256/177/DD8. Summary; Bourke Pastures Protection Board Minute Books 1908-1919, ML, 2/1960.

to control St John's Wort.⁹⁸ Harold Thorby, Minister for Agriculture in the Bavin government, promised to give consideration to continuing the scheme⁹⁹ but I cannot find any allocation in the budget.

In 1928 Thorby outlined proposals to increase the powers of the pastures protection boards to deal with noxious weeds in conjunction with the shires. The Department of Agriculture would be the co-ordinating body and its work would be financed by a small levy on unimproved property values. In other amendments to the Pastures Protection Act the franchise would be broadened and it would be made easier for landholders to put up a satisfactory case against prosecution for failure to eradicate rabbits.¹⁰⁰ Apparently no contradiction was seen between accepting the boards' arguments that they would be more effective enforcers of noxious weed control than the shires, and at the same time reducing the punitive force of their rabbit control authority. Delegates to the eleventh annual conference of the boards favoured the changes but several members strongly objected to co-operating with the shires: 'The question must be very carefully handled, and should be entirely in the hands of the stockowners, particularly in view of the projected alteration in the franchise'.¹⁰¹

98 NSW Budget Estimates, Lands Department, 1925-26, 1926-27.

99 ANUA, Graziers' Association E/256/177/DD5, 14 December 1927.

100 SMH, 30 May 1928.

101 ANUA, Graziers' Association E/256/226/DD11. Newspaper cutting on the conference.

A year later the proposed legislation was explained to the Shires' Association. The bill implied a much greater degree of centralization than had been anticipated. The minister would be assisted by a board representing local bodies. Both the minister and existing local bodies could order weed destruction to take place, and a penalty of up to £50 for a first offence could be imposed. Subsequent fines could be as much as £100. The movement of stock and equipment from infested areas could be restricted. The minister would set a rate of unimproved property value and augment it by a pound for pound subsidy. All money would be remitted by the government to the shires for approved work. The Shires' Association was not favourably impressed. The Vice-President likened the scheme to the Victorian system, which he believed was very costly.¹⁰² A conference of all interested parties was called for 30 May 1929. The outcome was familiarly indecisive and the financial stringencies of the depression soon buried the whole plan.

Whether or not a system of divided local administration was as bad as its critics claimed is not relevant to the question of how successive governments went about developing vermin and weed policies. The arguments that those involved used, and the views that they expressed or implied, were important if they were accepted by their contemporaries, regardless of whether they were based on

¹⁰² SMH, 22 May 1929.

verifiable facts. However, in terms of the frequently stated belief that effective vermin and weed control had to be co-ordinated over large areas, the New South Wales policy created a number of problems that were recognized at the time. Even the Pastoral Review admitted that 'some pastures protection boards do not adopt the stringent enforcement which the seriousness of the pest demands'.¹⁰³ The article went on to say that farmers and graziers should be forced to carry out their duty, but it did not say how. Examples of the difficulty of getting concerted action are provided by the minute books of the Bourke Pastures Protection Board.

From 1910 to 1915 there was a running debate within the board over whether it was worth spending any money on the travelling stock routes. Some said the funds were too small to do any good and others claimed that stock entering from neighbouring areas would cancel any positive results. In the end they did nothing at all. In 1914 the Bomballa Board asked all the boards to support a strong protest against the Minister of Agriculture's suggestion that all poisoning should be banned within 25 miles of freezer works. Bourke had no freezer and so declined to give an opinion.¹⁰⁴ In 1915 the casting vote of the chairman determined that the fox scalp bounty rose to £1, although

103 PR, 16 October 1918, p. 923.

104 Minute Book, Bourke Pastures Protection Board, 3 November 1914.

the bounty payments in adjacent districts had been lowered,¹⁰⁵ and in 1919 the board was unable to reach a decision about the proposal from the Glen Innes Board that all primary producer organizations should combine to finance a wire netting company.¹⁰⁶ These were all important matters and, except for the last point, they were the kind of problems about which Victorian landholders did not have to try to reach a consensus.

Neither state could point with pride to its work on vermin and weed control but, given efficient leadership and a return to economic prosperity, the Victorian system offered fewer barriers to the application of new or more rigorous counter-measures. Differences in the development of the two colonies before the introduction of the rabbit had proved to be more influential on vermin and weed policies than had their later shared experiences. This might suggest that the new federal government, coming fresh to the problems, would find its lack of precedents and experience an advantage. However, in politics no slate is ever absolutely clean, and when the federal authorities began to make vermin and weed control decisions they encountered many similar restraints as well as some that were a product of the constitutional situation.

105 Ibid., 2 November 1915.

106 Ibid., 28 May 1919.

CHAPTER 10

The Federal Government

Section 1 Reluctant Involvement

Many people outside the country were mystified as to why Australia had so much trouble controlling rabbits. As garbled rumours of large rewards filtered abroad numerous gentlemen offered the Commonwealth the benefit of their European, African and American knowledge and awaited suitable remuneration.¹ After writing to the Prime Minister about the virtues of wire netting and poison baits one Viennese correspondent was soon distressed to learn that such measures were being used: 'That smacks dreadfully of plagiarism, and if I were to follow the advice of friends I should not write to you first but to the League of Nations. But I think that perhaps you have mislaid my address'.² If plagiarism it were, the accusation was somewhat late, for the states had been pursuing these measures since the 1880s. It was also a misdirected charge, for as Prime Ministers from Watson to Bruce were at times relieved to explain, vermin and weed eradication, indeed all practical agricultural matters, were in more than one sense a state preserve.

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- 1 CSIROA, Correspondence file 81. Australian Archives, CSR A 458/F384. Prime Minister's Department, Correspondence files, Multi-number series, Second System.
- 2 A.A. CRS A 458/F384/2. Prime Minister's Department.

Almost fifteen years went by before the federal government entered into direct participation with the states in even one, highly specialized areas of weed control, and for over twenty years there were no schemes for sharing the burden of vermin eradication. A generation or more of state experience with costly, inefficient, unpopular legislation, designed to rid the land of various pests, could be cited to justify the federal stance. Nevertheless, despite an aversion to the particular problem and an awareness of the sensitivity of the constitutional issues, there were influences at work forcing the nation's leaders to pay attention and eventually to dabble, if not plunge, into the snag-ridden legislative waters.

Australia owed its prosperity to its primary industries and although the Constitutional Conventions had not considered that the federal government would need powers in this field no government could afford to ignore the health of its tax base. Sir John Quick suggested the formation of a Department of Agriculture in 1901 but the proposal, along with the request for a quarantine act, was lost amid the demands of the long procedural debates and necessary legislative formulations of the first few years. In 1904 the House of Representatives formally approved a motion that 'to promote the primary industries of Australia a federal Department of Agriculture ought to be established at an early date'.³ This motion stood on the notice paper for three years and during this time no state raised any

3 CPD, 1904; 23, 6505.

objection. Yet when it came to be debated every speaker expressed anxiety over the possibility of antagonizing the states by duplicating their efforts or appropriating their projects.⁴ This fear was to bedevil all bills and discussions through into the 1920s, when the advent of CSIR ended the proposal, except for the short-lived Department of Commerce and Agriculture in the 1940s. It needs to be understood for the light it throws on the problems inherent in the formation of any federal policy on agricultural matters and for the background information it provides on later commonwealth involvement in pest control.

Sir John Quick outlined the areas with which he hoped a federal Department of Agriculture would concern itself. These were the problems associated with the import and export of animal and plant products, original research into diseases affecting stock and crops and also water and soil, and the development of foreign markets and intelligence.⁵ Supporters of the motion took up long sections of the debates with speeches outlining the excellent work done by the Bureaux of Agriculture in the U.S.A. and Canada, but most were certain that the Australian counterpart would be more modest and economical. There was an understandable concern to steer between two extremes. On the one hand the

4 Ibid., 6499.

5 Ibid., 1904, 20, 3037.

case for federal intervention had to be made sufficiently obvious to absolve the government from charges of unnecessary bureaucratic proliferation: on the other hand it must not look as if the states were being accused of incompetence. As a result the bill emphasised the need for centralized collation and dissemination of scientific findings rather than original research. With regrettable scepticism about the intellectual drive to be found in the new commonwealth one member said: 'I do not think that any science that is likely to be applied by an Australian Department of Agriculture would be likely to overcome difficulties which are at present engaging the best experts in the world'.⁶ There were no howls of protest. Although the motion was carried a Labor member summed it up by saying: 'I have seldom listened to a debate which was carried on with less animation or listened to by so few members'.⁷

After such a lack lustre preview it would not be surprising if the idea had quietly faded from the political stage. In fact little was heard of it till after the passage of the 1907 Quarantine Act, but then it was raised by representatives of all parties in all sessions till 1916. In 1907 the Age informed its readers that a Bureau of Agriculture bill was being prepared, whether the state premiers were in favour of it or not.⁸ Senator Best, a

6 Ibid., 3049.

7 Ibid., 3061.

8 Age, 3 February 1907.

Victorian lawyer with wide experience of Victorian land policy confirmed this: 'concerning that determination we do not find it necessary to consult the state governments in any way. But in determining the scope of the operation of the Bureau we shall be only too pleased to seek the co-operation and cordial assistance of the state agriculture departments'.⁹ In 1908 the grand total of £500 was placed on the estimates towards the cost of a federal bureau and Groom, then Attorney-General in Deakin's protectionist ministry, presented a memorandum, setting forth the scope and justification of the proposed organization.¹⁰ In 1909 the bill was introduced into the Senate. It had initially been placed on the House notice paper but was transferred to furnish more work for the Upper House.¹¹ In essence the legislation provided for the dissemination of the results of scientific investigations into all aspects of primary industry, the carrying out of experiments into pests, and into animal and plant disease control, and the propagation and encouragement of new strains of plants.

Labor members were peeved. Their party had been accused frequently of having centralizing, aggrandizing tendencies, yet here was Deakin, newly returned to office

9 CPD, 1908; 4, 8506

10 Sir George Currie & John Graham, The Origins of CSIRO - Science and the Commonwealth Government, Melbourne, 1966, p. 2; CPD, 1908, 48, 2753.

11 CPD, 1909; 52, 4595.

with an uneasy coalition of non-Labor groups, pressing for a major extension of commonwealth powers in an area in which there were long established, active state departments. A Labor Senator exclaimed: 'Had this measure been introduced by the Labor party, I can imagine the expressions of horror which would have fallen from the so-called State Righters about federal interference with state functions'.¹² According to the opposition the bill was intended as a stop-gap measure to keep the Senate occupied at the end of the session, after which it would lapse, and as an electoral appeal to the farmers.¹³ However, as the government pointed out, Fisher had suggested a similar organization in his policy speech at Gympie in 1908.¹⁴ It had not been mentioned during Labor's time in office but all parties had agreed in 1904 that there was a need in this direction. Groom's concern with agriculture was of long standing and it was at his invitation that the Scottish Agricultural Commissioners, a highly regarded body of men with extensive practical and theoretical knowledge of farming who had conducted surveys for the Canadian and Danish Governments, came to Australia. Groom was to persist with his advocacy of the application of science to primary industry till the formation of CSIR fulfilled his dream.

12 Ibid., 4615.

13 Ibid., 4616; 4617; 4596; 5099.

14 Ibid., 4595; 4602; 4613.

If the bill was designed as an empty gesture to placate the rural sector it was ill-conceived. Although small farmers were ready to grasp at any proposal that appeared to offer the prospect of improved incomes, the more influential sectors of the industry, at least as represented by the Victorian Chamber of Agriculture, were wary of the political implications of the move and opposed the scheme.¹⁵ More importantly, the 1905 Premiers' Conference had been united in rejection of Deakin's tentative advances along the same lines.¹⁶ A conference of state Ministers of Agriculture in 1908 decided that a Federal Bureau of Agriculture would be redundant¹⁷ but the non-Labor parties presented their bill in 1909 and did so again in 1913, soon after their return to office. Their motives are unlikely to have been as opportunistic as their opponents claimed.

Undoubtedly there were features of primary production that warranted concern. The forty tons of fermenting, exploding Australian fruit pulp that had to be dumped in the English Channel was no advertisement for the expanding fruit industry; the arrival in London of rancid Victorian butter did nothing for the dairy industry; cargoes of badly tinned rabbits whose aroma drove passengers to

15 Ibid., 5099.

16 Ibid., 4739.

17 Ibid., 4595.

demand the clearance of the holds were no way to make money out of the pestiferous rodent, and failures of freezing techniques did not inspire the confidence of English meat importers.¹⁸ These may be classed as minor, if annoying set-backs to the necessary drive for export earnings, but there were deeper reasons for concern. Australian wheat yields were low by world standards. Cattle tick posed serious problems for the beef industry. Blow-flies still caused heavy losses of sheep. State Departments of Agriculture were confronted with ever growing lists of imported weeds that threatened to supplant more advantageous species, or like prickly pear and skeleton weed, to render whole areas worthless. The nation was ill-prepared to cope with major outbreaks of animal or plant diseases. Dry farming techniques were in their infancy and of course there was the perennial problem of the rabbits. As the Scottish Commissioners had clearly pointed out, many areas of primary production needed rigorous scientific investigation. The states were doing much excellent work, particularly when compared to Britain: 'Upwards of 30 stations or farms [are] devoted to experiment and research, and if orchards, vineyards and semi-permanent areas are added, the total is over 80'.¹⁹ However, there was considerable over-lapping and wasteful repetition: 'Time and money would be saved by

18 Ibid., 1904, 20, 3038; 3039, 1904, 22, 6498.

19 Scottish Agricultural Commissioners, Australia, Its Land, Conditions and Prospects, the Observations and Experiences of the Scottish Agricultural Commissioners 1910-1911, Edinburgh, 1911, p. 164.

placing some of the work of research in the hands of a federal department'.²⁰

The major difference between the original 1904 debates and the proposals of 1909 and 1913 was the change from a motion that was mainly concerned with the demands of the export trade to proposals for scientific research to enhance production itself. Perhaps in the intervening years the Liberal leaders had become more aware of the need to tackle basic problems, even though this meant federal intervention in areas of central concern to the state Agricultural Departments, or possibly they had become more confident of the potential of unified control to achieve specific goals. The 1913 bill was a bolder proposal than Quick had envisaged. It seemed that Cook, the new Liberal Prime Minister, was prepared to grasp the nettle and challenge the states' rights to undisputed control of agricultural matters.

Once again the Labor opposition concentrated on the failure adequately to consult the states, let alone win their approval, and on the open-ended nature of the funding provisions.²¹ There was no doctrinaire division along party lines. Some Labor men praised particular features of the bill but objected to its form. A few were obviously only using the debates as a forum for airing well-known

20 Ibid., p. 172.

21 CPD, 1913; 70, 935.

hobby horses, such as William Higgs, a Queensland printer and journalist who kept talking about the 'socialist nature' of the measure. Although the government blamed the opposition when the bill lapsed at the end of the session, the fault was hardly one-sided. There was a two-month hiatus during the second reading so that, without stonewalling tactics, the bill did not reach the Senate till the last day of the session. It was asking a great deal of a Labor controlled states' House to pass this far from perfect piece of legislation without debate. The suspicion remains that the Liberal Cabinet was not sorry to avoid confrontation with the Premiers.

Until 1915 the initiative for federal involvement in agricultural matters had come from the non-Labor parties. The need for increased productivity in primary industries apparently weighed more heavily than any ideological commitment to inviolate states' rights, but the problem of how to create an agency for commonwealth involvement remained unresolved. The awkward juxtaposition of conflicting principles also affected the incoming Labor Prime Minister in 1914. As in 1908 the Labor party referred to the advantages of the centralized application of scientific investigations, but in reply to an accusation by Groom that there were no plans for a suitable organization, Fisher asked, 'Does the Honourable Member see any way of effectively doing it without the full co-operation of the states, because

that is my difficulty'.²²

Fisher also had difficulties within his own party. As the opposition pointed out, many Labor men were more concerned about the evils of the land monopoly or the virtues of land taxation than about applying science to primary production.²³ Up to a point Fisher could avoid the constitutional problems of involving the commonwealth in agricultural research by funding individual experts to work on existing state projects, such as the bitter-pip disease in Victorian orchards or the worm nodules in Queensland beef,²⁴ but once he committed the government to heavy annual expenditure to aid primary producers in general he was bound to arouse opposition from some of the more egalitarian of his party. Dr William Maloney, for instance, a Victorian radical, believed that many social and economic problems could be solved by breaking up large estates and he thought that vermin and noxious weeds were doing their bit to facilitate this process. It was sometimes argued that land hunger would lead to demands for closer settlement which would push up the value of the land and thus make it economical to rid it of pests like rabbits and prickly pear.²⁵ Some backbenchers were worried

22 Ibid., 1915, 75, 472.

23 Ibid., 1909, 52, 4518.

24 Ibid., 1913, 70, 936.

25 Ibid., 1919, 89, 11546.

about who was going to reap the financial benefits of scientific discoveries if the federal government began to sponsor a broad programme of basic research. There were no guarantees that it would just be those concerned with the export trade or struggling small producers.²⁶

At this point world events began to intrude on what had been a somewhat limited debate. Following the outbreak of war the British Government realized with alarm that Germany had received enormous strategic advantages from its investments in scientific research. So it formed two permanent organizations under the general umbrella of Science and Industry Research, and circulated a white paper within Britain and the Dominions setting out the case for national scientific research institutes to tackle practical problems and to collaborate internationally. The Victorian Minister for Public Works in the Watt and Peacock Liberal Governments, Frederick Hagelthorn, urged his state to apply for inclusion in the scheme. Hagelthorn believed that not only the other states and the universities but also the federal government should be involved. In Hughes, then Attorney-General, he found a receptive listener. However, at the time, mid-1915, both men had more than enough on their plates with the formation of the Wheat Pool, under which the commonwealth undertook to finance, ship and market the excess wheat crop, ensuring that farmers got a fair price and Britain got an assured supply.

26 Ibid., 1919, 89, 11573-4.

This sudden federal venture into what had been an area of state responsibility provoked great criticism. Yet though it abraded the sensitive nerve of states' rights it indirectly hastened broader federal involvement in agricultural matters. It was a resounding success and thus it enhanced Hagelthorn's reputation and strengthened his resolve to see more national effort in other problem areas of primary production. His enthusiasm, energy and reputation won the Premiers' approval of the idea, couched in conveniently amorphous terms, of a national research project.²⁷

Then, in 1915 Hughes attended a luncheon at Melbourne University where a select audience of politicians and academics, chosen by the staff and Hagelthorn, listened to speakers supporting the general idea. They were followed by Hughes, who, apparently without consulting his Cabinet, pledged the government's support for up to half a million pounds. Talks were arranged almost immediately to set up an Advisory Council on Science, which was to be

27 Currie and Graham, CSIRO, pp. 13-55. Most of the information in this paragraph and next is taken from this excellent book. Sir George Currie was Principal Research Officer for CSIRO from 1929 to 1939 and Graham is the Records Admin. Officer. The book has the strengths and weaknesses of most studies of institutions made by highly placed, very well-informed 'insiders'. A new book is being written, with the full co-operation of CSIRO by K. Trace & B. Schedvin, so I saw no reason to try to do original research in this field.

the precursor of an Institute of Science and Industry. Faith in the power of science was high and with this to motivate them a few forceful individuals, not otherwise united by party or temperament, had gone some distance towards achieving their goals, despite a lack of burning public concern. However, their zeal was channelled into long prepared fields. The example of Groom's endeavours allied to the impetus of the Scottish Commissioners forms a neat comparison with the work of Hagelthorn aided by the example of the British science organization. In the years between, threatened allied catastrophe had strengthened the case for a national science effort, and legislative experiences had provided the Cabinet with a clearer understanding of the problems of passing definite acts in this area.

Nevertheless, Hughes was too astute to place much reliance on the lasting quality of political enthusiasm and he was not prepared to test it with an immediate bill. The Advisory Council was set up by order of the Governor-General in Council. Sooner or later the bill for a permanent body would have to be presented to parliament but in the meantime there was a chance to establish the principle of federal leadership in the application of scientific research and to accustom the state departments to collaborative effort. Hughes' own devotion to the cause is also hard to assess accurately. The next few years were not easy ones for him and his main energies had to be directed towards the war and

political survival. There are also some hints that his zeal abated, although in 1919 and 1920 he worked hard to achieve the passage of the necessary legislation. The Advisory Council was poorly financed and had to fight constantly to preserve the dominant role in its executive structure for scientists. During its four and a half years of existence it received only £66,200 for all purposes.²⁸ In April 1919, in anticipation of the Institute of Science and Industry bill the Advisory Council submitted an estimate of £43,300. At the minister's request this was reduced to £27,500 ordinary and £5,250 on loan account. Then followed a further reduction to £23,035 and in October it was decided to provide £14,000.²⁹

The drawn-out series of events leading to the introduction of the bills in 1919 and 1920, followed by the period of stagnation till Bruce reorganized the structure in 1926, creating CSIR, are not strictly relevant to this thesis and are well described by Currie and Graham, but a few general points need to be made to illustrate the gulf between the conception of the idea of an organization and the legislative delivery of a healthy institution.

The politicians, industrialists and scientists

28 Ibid., 109.

29 CSIROA, Advisory Council Minutes, 14 April, 28 July, 22 September, 14 October 1919.

who drew up the draft for the interim Advisory Council had diverse expectations of its role, and fortunately for the new body these were not clarified or it would have been smothered in conflict. A tentative list of likely projects was suggested but it remained vague as to whether the Council role would be that of publicist, co-ordinator or primary researcher.³⁰ The working relationship between the state committees and the central executive was similarly ill-defined. What became readily apparent was the continuing underlying hostility of established political and bureaucratic groups to the new authority.

The senior scientist within the public service, responsible for the setting of standards, the Government Analyst, made no secret of his opposition to commonwealth research facilities outside the ambit of the Customs Department.³¹ Similarly, when ministerial responsibility for the Council was transferred from the Prime Minister's Department to the Department of Trade and Customs in 1918 there was great anxiety on the part of the executive until,

30 Currie and Graham, CSIRO, p. 52. The list consisted of: blowflies, improved zinc extraction, brown coal utilization, mechanical cotton picking, prickly pear, aluminium and ferro alloy production, efficient potash production, indigenous grasses, manufacture of fine chemicals, drugs and explosives.

31 CSIROA, Drafting Committee of the Advisory Council, January 1916.

after an exchange of minutes, ministerial clarification was received, restating the independence of the Institute.³²

The same problem emerged again during 1923 when once again the Department of Trade and Customs sought to exercise its hegemony, at least over non-scientific staff working for the Institute.³³ The Solicitor-General ruled in favour of the Institute's autonomy, but contact with the minister was still only possible through the filter of the Department of Trade and Customs.

Potentially far more serious was the continuing suspicious isolationism of the state governments. Because of lack of funds projects promoted by the Advisory Council and later by the Institute were mainly conducted on a part-time basis by scientists using their own university or state facilities. The 1918 Premiers' Conference circulated a memorandum on the encroachment of the commonwealth and its Advisory Council on state agriculture departments. Holman of New South Wales led the attack. Several Premiers, notably those of Victoria and South Australia, were not fully convinced by his argument that there was no need for a national organization, and after discussion with Gerald Lightfoot, the Advisory Council

32 Ibid., Advisory Council Minutes, 28 May 1918.

33 Currie and Graham p. 123.

secretary, David Oman, Victorian Minister for Agriculture, told the Advisory Council that they had 'cleared the air'.³⁴ It was hoped that a discussion about ticks and prickly pear would prove similarly soothing to Holman, but it did not. The implications of this meeting can be seen in the stormy passage given to the bills of 1919 and 1920.

Another strand of the opposition to the establishment of the Institute was revealed by Hughes' arguments with David Masson, Professor of Chemistry at Melbourne University, the most eminent academic on the Advisory Council and the man Hughes had appointed Chairman. The disagreement was over the kind of director who should be appointed. This bears upon the contemporary attitude towards science and it has particular relevance to proposals on vermin and weed control. As previously mentioned, farmers 'knew' that there had to be a simple, cheap solution to massive problems, such as rabbits and prickly pear. This faith in science was a major element in nineteenth century thought and has persisted, under challenge since World War 11, to the present. However, if science was regarded as the true religion, scientists were often seen as its rather inadequate priests. Hughes distrusted their administrative ability and favoured control by 'a man of affairs'.³⁵ Parliament shared his

34 CSIROA, Advisory Council Minutes, 12 August 1918.

35 Currie and Graham pp. 68-9, 93.

doubts. When at long last the bill to establish the Institute was introduced in 1919 even some of its supporters emphasised the need to have 'practical men' in control.³⁶ It was withdrawn, revised and re-introduced the following year. The changes were not discussed with the members of the Advisory Council and Masson resigned in protest. The point at issue was that control was to be given to one man, not necessarily a scientist, instead of to three directors.³⁷ According to the Minister it was vital to reduce the fears of the House about expenditure: '[He] said straight out that the former bill was regarded as being top heavy'.³⁸ However, there was more to it than that:

He [the Minister] did not say it in so many words but it was indicated that the Cabinet was dropping the Advisory Councils and the three directors out of the Bill for diplomatic reasons. Cabinet no doubt felt that it would have been a strange procedure to have consulted bodies whom they proposed to execute. 39

Those 'diplomatic reasons' were not just financial. Accusations had been made of 'injudicious' as well as

36 CPD, 1919, 89, 11542 (Best), 11565 (West), 11567 (Spence).

37 CSIROA, Exec. Committee Minutes, 6 July 1920.

38 Ibid., Exec. Committee, 14 July 1920, Dr Cameron reporting.

39 Ibid., Exec. Committee.

inefficient management by the old board.⁴⁰

The 1920 bill had a somewhat less torrid reception, but the old cries of impractical scientists, wasteful duplication and unnecessary assaults on states' rights were repeated.⁴¹ It was a non-party vote. Of the 16 members who opposed the second reading three were Nationalists, including Jowett, soon to become Deputy Leader of the new Country Party.⁴² He was also an executive member of the Graziers' Association of the Southern Riverina (which favoured the new institution), and he was opposed by Earle Page, his future leader. The parties had not yet adopted distinctive policy positions on this topic, and when presented with the estimates of the Institute's needs by the new Director, George Knibbs, there was general agreement to prune them severely. The Institute survived its formal delivery but during the next six years it received only just over £97,000 to cover all investigations, capital works and salaries.⁴³

It says a great deal for the dedication of the founding members that the Institute did not simply merge

40 CPD, 1919, 89, 11546.

41 Ibid., 1920, 92, 2565.

42 Ibid., 2890-1.

43 Currie and Graham p. 109ff. The Institute received: 1920-21 £15,000; 1921-22 £15,000; 1922-23 £20,907; 1923-24 £21,356; 1924-25 £24,755 (including £5,000 to the separate Engineering Standards Laboratory).

into an existing department, but whether Knibbs, the first Commonwealth Statistician and founder of the very highly regarded Bureau of Census and Statistics, whose first love was still statistics, would have resisted the pressure much longer is uncertain. It was not just big controversies that beset the Director, but also continual pin-pricks, such as the Defence Department attempt to resume a major part of the Sherwood Laboratory site, Queensland, for a drill ground. As Knibbs pointed out, the laboratory needed strict quarantine facilities because it experimented with imported insects, and it represented a £40,000 investment, which was a major part of the Institute's total allocation.⁴⁴

There were a number of projects on which the states would have welcomed federal assistance, and the 1922 Premiers' Conference gave general approval to the principle of co-operative research, but because of shortage of money the Institute had to reject many requests.⁴⁵ Without an adequately financed, formalized structure the Institute could not grow. On the one hand the federal government would not vote it money simply to hand over to state investigations, but on the other hand it would not sanction the creation of a forceful organization with its own bureaucratic structure, capable of forging a new

44 CSIROA, Correspondence file 81, Noxious Weeds, 23 March 1925, 14 April 1925.

45 CSIROA, Correspondence file 102A, Knibbs to Stewart, Minister for Works and Railways, Vic. 7 December 1923.

relationship with the states. Structurally and financially the Institute could be compared to a very little boat, uncertainly navigated, in a very rough sea.

However, the organization did have some strong supporters among the newspapers, rural organizations and some parliamentarians, and in 1925 the imperial connection once again came to its aid. The British offer of £1,000,000 for Dominion research into new industries is unlikely to have been sufficient in itself to have turned an unwilling government towards a national scientific organization but Bruce had been sympathetic to the idea for some time.⁴⁶ He had taken ministerial control for the Institute from the encroaching embrace of the Department of Trade and Customs and placed it in the more sympathetic hands of Senator Reginald Wilson, a farmer and businessman, soon to become head of the new Department of Markets and Migration. There had also been other imperial straws in the wind. For instance, the primary research into the control of St John's Wort, a weed which was spreading rapidly in southern Australia, had been done, at the Institute's request, by the Bureau of Entomology in London. Predictably, the British were requesting a larger financial contribution from the federal government.⁴⁷ Australia

46 Currie and Graham, pp. 122-9.

47 CSIROA, Exec. Committee Minutes, 21 September 1920.

could not rely on getting its research done 'on the cheap' overseas, and even existing collaboration between foreign institutions and Australian scientists would become more difficult if there were no comparable Australian scientific organization to co-ordinate exchanges and arrange finance.

In one tenuous form or another there had been a commonwealth scientific organization for ten years, and it had not sucked in enormous funds or adopted hare-brained schemes, or even, in recent years, grossly offended the state Departments of Agriculture. Similar bodies in the U.S.A., Canada, Germany, Japan and Britain, had shown the worth of a national approach. Familiarity may have bred a measure of acceptance because in 1926 an act,^{*} which finally set up the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, passed with little fuss, although a few members raised the same old objections. Perhaps the fact that the proposal was no longer associated with Hughes soothed some feelings. However, a more likely reason for its relatively placid passage was that, as in previous legislation, the most important feature of the relationship between CSIR and the state departments remained

* Act to Amend the Institute of Science and Industry 1920, (1926, No. 20).

unclarified. As Currie and Graham have noted:

His [Bruce's] words heavily favoured the notion that the commonwealth should co-ordinate and subsidise scientific work to be done in the state laboratories and universities, but his deeds did not. 48

In a time of budgetary surplus CSIR was given £500,000 for a trust fund, which was to prove of inestimable value during the lean years of the 1930s.⁴⁹

Over the next few years some momentous decisions were taken, setting the lines of development for CSIR and ultimately for the present CSIRO. However, consideration of these matters is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis. In terms of an examination of the process of government policy formation it would be erroneous to argue that the development of CSIR policies necessarily reflected the policy determinations of the cabinet of the day. CSIR was an independent, statutory body, administered by a council of three federal appointees, the chairmen of the six state committees and co-opted scientists. Many of its early successes were due to the calibre of its leadership and the qualities of some of its state advisors. The prime example of this can be seen in the handling of the basic problem of whether CSIR would have its own

48 Sir George Currie and John Graham, 'CSIR 1926-1939', Public Administration, XXXI(1) (3), 1974, p. 232.

49 Ibid., pp. 230, 235. This was provided in two instalments of £250,000 in 1926 and 1928.

research facilities and initiate policies or should operate through existing state projects and facilities. This matter was dealt with at the 1926 Agriculture Conference.

Early correspondence within CSIR reveals that the main aim was to win the goodwill and co-operation of the states:

I [Rivett] would not put any cut and dried scheme before this conference. If possible we want them [the States] to appear to be giving us a push towards the development of some super organization in agriculture. 50

Yet this had to be done without allowing the CSIR to become simply a catch-all for the most difficult, expensive problems. As Lightfoot, the very experienced secretary, warned his council:

Experience shows that it is very improbable that the State representatives would approach the whole matter in a national spirit. There is a danger that each state will desire to load onto the CSIR its own problems, regardless of their national importance, and especially those problems which are very difficult of solution. 51

The credit for the amicable formation of the Standing Committee on Agriculture, a joint commonwealth-state body

50 CSIROA, Correspondence file 209/26, Rivett to Julius and Newbegin, 25 January 1926.

51 Ibid., Lightfoot to Julius and Newbegin.

responsible for the initial allocation of projects, belongs to the men of the Executive Committee of the CSIR and the Victorian State Director of Agriculture, Dr Cameron.⁵² The other states were led to accept the plan of a division of efforts between the central body and the states along the general lines of pure research versus applied research, or research versus extension work (the instruction of farmers).⁵³ The balance would shift over the next decade and various refinements were introduced but, given the climate of opinion at the end of the 1920s it proved adequate. It was a workable policy decision, arrived at by the CSIR Executive and the states, not a Cabinet formulation. The Minister could interfere. When Victorian and South Australian fruit growers demanded that their local CSIR officer show them the correct method of dipping dried fruit, the Minister for Markets and Migration urged CSIR to comply, and despite South Australian objections it reluctantly did so.⁵⁴ However, although such pressure existed, it does not seem to have been applied in any consistent fashion to influence the overall pattern of the Organization's actions. When looking for evidence of commonwealth policy on vermin and weed control it is far more relevant

52 Sir Frederick Currie and John Graham, *The Origin of the Standing Committee on Agriculture*, Public Administration, XXVII (1), 1968, p. 29.

53 CSIROA, Correspondence file 209/26, 1926 Agriculture Conference.

54 Currie and Graham, 'Standing Committee on Agriculture'. p. 29.

to study the very early years when financially and administratively the federal government was more directly involved.

Section 2: Particular Cases

What passes for commonwealth policy on vermin and noxious weeds had its origins within the shaky framework of the Advisory Council and the Institute, and the problems that bedevilled those bodies in their efforts to establish a national scientific organization to assist primary industry are mirrored in the difficulties experienced in the more localized area. The plan for a joint Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland operation against prickly pear was raised when Hughes proposed the formation of the Institute of Science and Industry. There were excellent reasons for making prickly pear a prime target. The plant had spread slowly from its introduction to Scone in 1839 but by 1919 it covered over 20 million acres in Queensland and over two million acres in New South Wales.⁵⁵ In the whole of Australia there were just over 18½ million acres under crops. The pear was spreading at the rate of about one million acres per annum. Botanists confessed that they could not see why it should not move further south, and there were

55 CSIROA, Correspondence file 81, Brief Statement Prepared for Institute of Science and Industry Bill, 1919.

already isolated pockets of infestation in Victoria.⁵⁶

It was a highly visible problem and because of the grotesque nature of the plants it was easier to convince non-rural parliamentarians about the menace of prickly pear than about that of St John's Wort, which was the other prolific weed causing major concern.

Although Queensland had taken over 50 years to realise that it had a potential disaster on its hands, in the early twentieth century much valuable research on chemical counter-measures had been done at Dulacca under Dr Jean White. The results had not been promising. Arsenic, either in the form of arsenious trichloride gas or as the acid, arsenious chloride, was the cheapest and most effective poison tested, but it often proved fatal to the horses used to spread it, which did not augur well for large scale application, and it was still too expensive to use to clear grazing land.⁵⁷ A company called Cactus Estates had been created to try to destroy the pear by converting it to something useful, such as fodder, potash, paper pulp and power alcohol, but none of the processes had proved to be commercially viable because of expense. The Queensland Government station at Wallimbillah showed that the pear could be used as fodder, but it was calculated that, even if all the cattle in

56 CSIROA, Advisory Council Minutes, 9 December 1919.

57 Ibid., Correspondence file 81, Queensland 1916.

Australia were fed on harvested pear, they would only be able to keep down the annual increase.⁵⁸ Mechanical eradication had also failed, despite suggestions that tanks and flame-throwers could do the job. Several varieties, notably opuntia monacantha, had been attacked by various cochineal insects tested, but the well-named 'pest pears', opuntia inermis and opuntia stricta were not as vulnerable as early tests suggested. Queensland was ready to agree with the travelling Prickly Pear Commission that the best prospects seemed to be offered by a biological solution, but the range of insects and parasites to be studied was very large and the consequences of error could be as bad as, or worse than, the original complaint.

As the commonwealth was responsible for quarantine arrangements its wishes could not be ignored entirely and after the outbreak of war chemical counter-measures became scarce and even more expensive and German scientists were no longer employed at Dulacca.⁵⁹ Queensland decided to close the station and offered it to the commonwealth.⁶⁰ On the basis of the original discussion with Hughes the Advisory Council wrote to the New South Wales and Queensland Governments proposing a joint investigation that would cost

58 Ibid.

59 CPD, 1918; 86, 6518. (Judging by later comments this left the Queensland public service very short of biological scientists). See p. 359.

60 CSIROA, Correspondence file 81, New South Wales, Memo to Minister for Trade and Customs, 24 January 1919.

£8,000 p.a. for five years. The commonwealth was prepared to vote £4,000 p.a. if each state would contribute £2,000 p.a.

The initial New South Wales support had come from the Minister for Lands but when the formal proposal was made Holman rejected the offer.⁶¹ Queensland was enthusiastic so the Advisory Council persisted in its negotiations but with little success. In 1917 New South Wales replied that its Experiments Supervision Committee saw little justification for spending £8,000, and instead of the state contributing £2,000 p.a. it would be better if the commonwealth gave a £500 p.a. subsidy to an existing state research facility.⁶² Holman said his government was expecting satisfactory results from the work of the Department of Agriculture biologist, Dr George Darnell-Smith. Darnell-Smith, who in 1924 became Director of the Botanical Gardens and the most highly paid scientist in the department, believed in chemical control of prickly pear but, as the Advisory Council noted, the State Experiments Committee had published no results and he was engaged in work that went over the same ground as that covered by Dr Jean White.⁶³ In March 1918 Holman wrote to the Prime

61 Ibid., Memo to Piddington on behalf of Lightfoot, 8 June 1918.

62 Ibid., Advisory Council Minutes, 30 October 1917.

63 Ibid., 30 October 1917, 22 November 1917, 13 February 1918.

Minister:

The better course would be for a Committee of experts representing the Commonwealth, New South Wales and Queensland to be formed for the purpose of carrying out the investigation. It is considered that for the first year a sum of £2,000 should be sufficient, and it is suggested that your government contribute £1,000 of this and New South Wales and Queensland £500 each. 64

Queensland informed the commonwealth that they would only participate in a joint scheme on the original terms.

As well as Holman's well known resistance to any increase in federal powers there may well have been a certain amount of departmental obstreperousness influencing the New South Wales decision. The Secretary of the Advisory Council had an interview with the New South Wales Experiments Supervision Committee and reported that:

It appeared to him [Lightfoot] that the proposals had not been treated on their merits. The Under-Secretary for Agriculture appeared to have opposed the proposal for the reason that he had not approved of action taken in the past by the commonwealth government in offering salaries higher than those paid by the state government to certain officers, such as butter graders, etc. 65

Interdepartmental rivalries were apparently also used by Holman as a way of getting negative reports to buttress his aversion to increased direct participation by the common-

64 Ibid., Correspondence file 81, Premier to Prime Minister, 12 March 1918.

65 Ibid., Advisory Council Minutes, 21 May 1918.

wealth government:

... it was the Minister for Lands who originally promised the assistance of New South Wales in the scheme. Each time we have written to the Premier of New South Wales subsequently however, the matter has been referred to the Department of Agriculture. The problem as it affects the two Departments is, however, different. The Department of Agriculture is chiefly interested in clearing pear on good agricultural land where a chemical method may well prove possible. The Lands Department is more concerned with checking the spread of pear on unoccupied lands and is quite certain, in view of the Dulacca experiment, that no chemical will be cheap enough to justify its use for this purpose. 66

As the negotiations dragged on unproductively departmental pettiness also threatened Queensland participation. The Under-Secretary for Agriculture favoured joint action but it was reported to the Advisory Council by the Chairman of the State Committee that:

Some of the officers of his Department, two of whom were members of the Board of Advice on Prickly Pear Instruction, have taken a strongly antagonistic attitude to Dr Jean White's work and strongly favour the Agriculture Department taking up this work rather than leaving it to the Science and Industry Council. 67

This could have meant the end of all hope of collaboration, but the Chairman went on to point out that, 'now that Dr

66 Ibid., Correspondence file 81, to Piddington on behalf of Lightfoot, 8 June 1918.

67 Ibid., Chairman of Queensland State Committee to Advisory Council, 15 December 1917.

Jean White Haney^{*} has left the service of the Queensland Government there is really no one in the government service with a biological training qualified to deal with this problem as an expert'.

The Queensland situation was far more acute than that in New South Wales, so pressure for innovation and effective counter-measures was stronger there. However, as the pear was still spreading at a fairly steady million acres a year, many of those acres south of the border, Holman was not immune to the arguments that extra-ordinary measures were warranted. By May 1919 he was ready to approve the general principle of collaboration but not the financial commitment.⁶⁸ However, the following month his Minister for Lands, Ashford, told the Advisory Council confidentially that the work of his department in no way constituted a solution to the pear infestation and he promised that he would use his best offices to try to get the Premier to look to 'more scientific methods'.⁶⁹ By the end of October formal agreement had been reached between the three participating governments and approaches were made to a very small group of scientists.

Once it was established and working the Prickly Pear Board acquired some strength through its statutory

68. Ibid., Advisory Council Minutes, 12 May 1919.

69 Ibid., 2 June 1919.

* She married and left the department. She later became one of the few female scientists in CSIR and did valuable work on Nagoora Burr and studies on sheep feeding preferences on New England pastures.

status and assured annual funding for five years, but like its parent body it also suffered from the unresolved tensions of commonwealth and state relationships and from the predatory instincts of long established state departments. Three years after the Board began its work the Queensland Government Entomologist told the Commissioners that it would have been better if all work had been left in state departmental hands.⁷⁰ Dr Darnell-Smith had reported to his state government the previous year in a similar vein. After inspecting the Sherwood Laboratory he expressed anxiety at the reliance being placed on biological control research:

I saw no results in the Laboratory to justify such a statement [that prickly pear would be completely eradicated] and as I have already pointed out, there is no reason to suppose that Laboratory results can be reproduced in the field. ⁷¹

He recommended that the state's contribution of £2,000 p.a. as well as half the federal contribution, which also came to £2,000 p.a., should be devoted to chemical research and immediate field work checking the pear in New South Wales. Such work would naturally fall in the province of his own agriculture department committee.

The Prickly Pear Board does not seem to have been

70 Ibid., Correspondence file 81, 18 June 1923.

71 Ibid., Report of inspection of Prickly Pear Station at Sherwood, 7 December 1922.

a happy group to work for. There was a great deal of squabbling and personal animosity. Much of it could be traced to financial stringencies which made the Commissioners rigorous in their application of rulings on leave entitlements, accrued holiday payments and field work expenses, but some of it appears to have been the result of state jealousies or the professional rivalry of state and commonwealth scientists.⁷² For instance, Arthur Temple Clerk, who ran the nursery at the Westwood Laboratory in Queensland and who had been involved in the breeding of cochineal insects before the establishment of the Board, and Henderson, the Queensland Government Analyst, were very critical of the techniques and field trips abroad of the chief scientist, Dr Harvey Johnston.⁷³ Darnell-Smith's continuing criticism of the project has already been mentioned. Such disagreements may have been inevitable and need not have been serious, but there were suggestions that, tired of taking instructions from an 'outsider', the states' arrangements for the release of a new batch of cochineal insects in 1923 were premature and did not include strict measures to ensure that the insects were parasite free.⁷⁴ Naturally state departments

72 Ibid., Correspondence file 81. Almost every scientist employed by the Board had trouble over one or more of these points. Filed by name.

73 Ibid., Temple Clerk to Froggatt, 14 July 1922.

74 Ibid., Professor Johnston, 14 April 1923.

were anxious to see the acreage of pear diminish and the utilization of state facilities and staff sometimes made tight administration difficult for the Prickly Pear Board. This was a serious problem because, as one of the Board's experts, Alan Dodd, wrote later, the whole project might have failed had any of 'cactoblastis cactorum's parasites been introduced with it or if native parasites had proved more dangerous to it'.⁷⁵

By 1924 the Board was eager for any signs of ultimate victory to assure itself of further finance. It had not received unqualified support from any of the participating governments, and there were federal parliamentarians who privately agreed with James Fenton, the Labor Whip, that 'this Institute will not lead to the eradication of the prickly pear'.⁷⁶ Although a variety of bugs and parasites had made some nibbles at success, there was a great deal of luck in the final achievement of a biological control for the pear. In 1924 the Minister for Trade and Customs listed 30 insects that had been introduced and tested with varying degrees of success. Against the name cactoblastis cactorum was the comment 'not successful'.⁷⁷ It had been introduced in 1914 by the

75 A.D. Dodd, Biological Campaign Against Prickly Pear, Brisbane, 1940, p. 17.

76 CPD, 1920, 92, 2890.

77 CPD, 1924, 108, 3629.

Queensland Travelling Commission (an extensive eighteen months overseas investigation of possible control measures) but had died out. Alan Dodd, the field officer in Paraguay, decided to try it again in 1924 and by 1926 there were extremely encouraging laboratory results.⁷⁸ Given the extensive list of possible insects and the time needed for adequate testing and quarantine the re-testing of cactoblastis at that crucial stage of the Board's existence was providential. The stunningly successful results ensured that there was no trouble about getting extra funds for spreading the insects in 1926. The commonwealth contribution was raised to £6,000 p.a. for a further five years and the states each gave £3,000 p.a.⁷⁹ The success of the Prickly Pear Board may also have influenced the passage of the Institute Amendment Act of 1926 but as the dramatic collapse of the cactus plants had not begun when the Act was passed, although hopes were high, this is very debatable.

At the same time as the Prickly Pear Board was starting its work the Advisory Council was bowing out of another weed eradication programme. In 1917 the Executive Committee had announced it would concentrate on three areas of noxious weed research: prickly pear, St John's Wort,

78 CSIROA, Correspondence file 81. Note for file 1926 concerning prickly pear.

79 Ibid., Executive Council Minutes, 21 October 1926.

and a survey of weed pests.⁸⁰ Most of the search for a biological control for St John's Wort was done by the Imperial Entomology Bureau in London. As it was a British weed it was hoped that a British insect would be found to control it. It was also cheaper and safer to pay the Bureau £200 p.a. than set up full quarantine, breeding and testing facilities in Australia. By 1918 the Queensland Government Entomologist, Tryon, and Professor Lefroy, the Advisory Council expert, were eager to begin testing beetles of the chrysomela family in Australia, but the other state Directors of Agriculture objected that it was too hazardous.⁸¹ The Advisory Council sounded out the Director of Quarantine who decided that 'it would seem to be my obvious duty to act in the direction of safety'.⁸² In April of the same year the Chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture expressed pessimism about the prospects of safely introducing insects that would be injurious to weeds. He believed that prickly pear was probably an exception.⁸³ When the Imperial Entomological Bureau reported in 1921 that they had only found one possible insect control, the

80 Ibid., Correspondence file 102/-/3, 1925 Summary of Weed Control. (The original minute was drawn up by the Executive Committee of the Advisory Council, not the Executive Council, which was not formed till 1920).

81 Ibid., 102/-/1918, Letters from State Directors, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia.

82 Ibid., Director of Quarantine to Secretary of Advisory Council, 16 January 1919.

83 Ibid., 102/-/-, Weed Pests. Howard, Chief of Bureau of Agriculture to Lightfoot.

beetle chrysomela varians, and that its appetite was too unpredictable for it to be safely introduced into a new environment, the Institute announced that it would take no further action.⁸⁴

Various rural organizations continued to write to the Institute and later to CSIR requesting a concerted campaign against the spread of St John's Wort, but nothing was done. When in 1924 the Victorian Premier requested a co-operative campaign against blackberries, St John's Wort, Californian thistle and ragwort the Institute described the kind of Economic Botany Section it would like to form, but then went on to say that it had to refuse all the suggestions on the grounds of lack of money.⁸⁵

Admittedly, until the 1920s the states had done little to help themselves. In 1919 the Advisory Council pointed out that 'not £100 has been spent on research and since 1902 not £1,000 on eradication'.⁸⁶ However, in the same year Victoria was proposing to spend £24,000 on noxious weed eradication, much of it on St John's Wort.⁸⁷ Awareness of the danger was growing and the federal government could not claim to be in the vanguard. In 1925 Victorian

84 Ibid., 102/-, Correspondence with Imperial authorities.

85 Ibid., Executive Council Minutes, 15 July 1927, Summary, noxious weeds.

86 Ibid., Advisory Council Minutes, 8 September 1919.

87 Ibid.

expenditure on weed clearance was £85,000 and in 1926 it was £100,000.⁸⁸ As St John's Wort spread into the soldier settlement area around Tumbarumba the New South Wales government offered the commonwealth use of abandoned farms for research. The offer had to be refused.⁸⁹

There was no attempt to set up a St John's Wort Board, despite the expectations of success surrounding the Prickly Pear Board by 1926. The New South Wales Minister for Lands, William Dunn, was rather rash when he told an audience of soldier settlers that, 'If he were a farmer and forced to choose between prickly pear and St John's Wort, without a moment's hesitation he would say, "Give me prickly pear"'.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, it was a serious, ever-growing problem. The only known remedy was the application of salt. In Victoria it was estimated that badly infested farms required six tons per acre, costing £2.7s.6d per ton, plus £1 for carting and spreading.⁹¹ Even prosperous farmers had to think twice before spending £18 per acre. The Daily Telegraph calculated that it could cost up to

88 Leader, Melbourne, 26 January 1926.

89 CSIROA, Correspondence file 102/-, correspondence with New South Wales; Advisory Council Minutes, 9 September 1918.

90 Ibid., 102/-, St John's Wort, press cuttings, Australian Farming, Richmond, 16 November 1925.

91 Argus, 23 January 1925.

£35 per acre in New South Wales.⁹² Even if this was an exaggeration obviously only good agricultural land warranted the outlay, but the worst hit areas were soldier settlements in the Ovens Valley and in southern New South Wales.

The weed did not cover the enormous area occupied by prickly pear but the pear had taken over 50 years to reach plague proportions and there was no reason to offer St John's Wort the same opportunity. It is a mark of the lack of a commonwealth policy on noxious weeds that the Institute was given so little encouragement to tackle this problem. The cynic might say that weeds counted for few votes. Probably more importantly, the auguries for cheap biological control in this case were soon recognised as unfavourable. It was going to be one of those expensive, intractable problems governments prefer to side-step. Whereas the states, through their Departments of Land and Agriculture, had to wrestle with it, the commonwealth was, by the nature of the constitution, distanced from the immediate impact. Two Australian political scientists, R. Smith and P. Weller have argued that the lack of formal constitutional responsibility for agriculture should be

92 Daily Telegraph, 25 May 1925.
 A.H. Chesterman, Menace of St John's Wort, New South Wales Government Printer, 1925, p. 6. The New South Wales Lands Department estimated salting cost 20s per acre for lightly infested land and £20 for heavily infested.

seen as a commonwealth resource.⁹³ It may have operated as such in the case of the introduction of wheat quotas, which was the example they discussed, but its effects on pest control were less beneficial. The ultimate danger to the Australian economy had been grasped by some leading politicians but, as with so many of the difficulties confronting primary industry, the federal government was able to avoid specific policy decisions while it held in abeyance the whole matter of the federal role in scientific research. Once CSIR was formally established and adequately funded, such decisions passed within its ambit. Prickly pear was a special case. It was strikingly obvious and, thanks to the work of the Queensland Travelling Commission, it offered hope of a relatively cheap solution, given a concerted effort.

A further example of the ambiguous nature of the federal response to pest control can be seen in the handling of the rabbit question. This was not one of the matters suggested as a likely topic for the Advisory Council to take up. The Pasteur Institute in the 1880s and Danysz in the early twentieth century had conducted extensive tests with virus diseases, without success. In 1919 Dr Aragão of Brazil wrote to the Advisory Council about rabbit myxoma. He had observed its lethal effects on his caged rabbits and considered it might solve Australia's problem. Sir

93 R.F. Smith and P. Weller, 'Public Servants, Interest Groups and Policy Making - Two Case Studies', Occasional Papers No. 12, Political Science, RSSH, ANU, 1976.

Harry Allen examined the evidence for the Advisory Council but, because Aragão could not supply more details on the method by which the disease could be communicated to healthy animals when over-crowding was not present, the investigation lapsed.⁹⁴ The Advisory Council had no laboratories or quarantine facilities for the extensive testing that would be necessary, and on the basis of previous experience, it had no expectations of eventual success. In 1924 the Director of Veterinary Research in New South Wales made some unsuccessful tests with the virus but could not discover how to make it spread. It was not until the 1930s that Dr Jean Macnamara learned of Aragão's work and took up the cause of myxomatosis. Her own field was paediatrics but she fought for the introduction of myxomatosis with the persistence of a fanatic. It took nearly twenty years before her battles with sceptical scientists, suspicious quarantine officials and an unpredictable virus and its carriers were successfully concluded.

Because of the extremely grave implications of introducing an inadequately studied disease the Institute's caution was laudable, but there were also other reasons for the procrastination. As the Institute's Journal observed in 1919, 'Another subject [apart from sun power energy] that is the cause of much controversy, and also

94 CSIROA, Advisory Council Minutes, 14 July 1919, 11 August 1919.

of much opposition, is that of controlling the rabbit by the introduction of some specific disease'.⁹⁵ Anxiety about the threat to the sheep industry, not to mention public health, was of deep concern to some members of parliament and when rumours about rabbit myxoma circulated there were a variety of hostile responses. Senator Earle, Vice-President of Hughes' Executive Council and son of a small farmer in Tasmania, said that 'in consideration of the evident abominable cruelty of such a disease and the possible risk to the public, the government should take steps to emphatically forbid such introduction'.⁹⁶ Another member of Hughes' party, a New South Wales farmer and Director of a Rabbit Board, John Lynch, asked 'will the Minister seriously consider the advisability of making it a capital offence to introduce any fresh disease into Australia?'.⁹⁷ The non-committal answer was that no such introduction was proposed.

Many leading newspapers were quite as suspicious. In 1907, at the time Danysz' experiments with chicken cholera had concluded unsuccessfully, the Sydney Morning Herald urged farmers to forget the idea of a miraculous disease and to reconsider the rabbit problem with fresh

95 Science and Industry, Journal of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, Vol. 1, 1919, p. 205.

96 CPD, 1919; 88, 11242.

97 CPD, 1919; 89, 12061.

minds.⁹⁸ The Melbourne Age went much further:

The ghastly experiments made with killing rabbits by breeding a deadly infection amongst them have deservedly failed ... while it had no promise of clearing the land of the rabbit pest it may spread more or less unwholesome contagion, so that while leaving the lands almost as much infected as before, it may entirely destroy, not the rabbits, but the rabbit trapping business. 99

Understandably, it is a much more emotive step to introduce an animal disease than it is to introduce a plant disease. Human beings do not catch plant diseases. They can catch rabies, brucellosis, psittacosis, hydatids and tuberculosis from their animals, just to name an unpleasant few. However, commerce rather than simple caution seems to underpin much of the reluctance towards further experimentation.

In a statement in 1917 which the Pastoral Review discussed in an editorial and never forgave, Hughes ordered the cessation of poisoning around all freezer works because 'rabbits now are no longer, as it were, a pest to be got rid of at all hazard, but a means of affording employment to large numbers of people, and a source of wealth to the community'.¹⁰⁰ The rabbit industry lobby was strong, influencing all parties. Rabbiters, as members of a union affiliated with the Australian Workers' Union,

98 SMH, 24 December 1907.

99 Age, 28 November 1908.

100 CPD, 1917; 81, 11487; Pastoral Review, 1917, Vol. 27, p. 311.

naturally looked to the Labor party. Individual trappers wrote to the federal Labor party whenever a possible rabbit disease was mooted. 'Now why should a few persons be aloud to interduce a man (a forener at that) loaded up with Deseased Germs' wrote one group in 1905.¹⁰¹ They demanded that Danysz should 'have his germs confiscated and destroyed as we know the Labour party can do more in the federal Parliament than in our local or States House'.

In 1919 the County Freezing Company, on behalf of the Rabbit Exporters of New South Wales, produced a type-script defending the industry and arguing for assured freezer space in ships to Britain. They referred to the estimated £750,000 capital investment in their state alone and gave the export earnings from the frozen carcass trade in the years 1915-18 as £531,920, £734,624, £913,142 and £985,190 respectively.¹⁰² In 1917 and 1918 Britain reserved the entire frozen carcass trade to provide cheap meat for the cities as the German blockade forced up prices. This contract was breached by Britain in 1918 but as the U.S.A. was also in the market for cheap meat the price remained inflated.¹⁰³ There were also the furriers to consider. Diseased rabbits do not produce good pelts, even if skinners are prepared to handle them. During the same years, 1915-18, export of skins returned £231,000, £266,000

101 A.A., CRS A2 05/4877, Prime Minister's Department, Trappers from Young, 3 October 1905 (spelling as in original).

102 Ibid., CRS A2 19/277, Rabbit shipments misc.

103 Ibid.

£441,000 and £1,158,000.¹⁰⁴ There are no official figures on the value of rabbit skins used domestically, but in the days when nearly all men and women wore felt hats it must have been considerable. During the war years Hughes used the War Precautions Act to set up a scheme for the compulsory purchase of all pelts, supposedly to ensure supplies and to prevent profiteering in the face of the demands for military headgear and strap pads. The government made a profit of £230,000 in less than one year out of the resale of skins to manufacturers.¹⁰⁵

Because of the employment aspect, as well as the supply of cheap meat to the towns, the Labor Party was more subject to pressure from the rabbit industry supporters than its opponents, but the division was far from clear cut. Small farmers tended to look to their rabbits for additional cash income. In 1921 the Graziers' Association of New South Wales noted how Darby's Falls' farmers near Carcoar had invested in a freezer works, and some were even protecting their rabbits.¹⁰⁶ One zealous farmer, who had laboriously cleared rabbits off 700 acres by fencing and then burning 6,700 logs and digging in 645 burrows, while consoling himself that, 'every blow of the pick is wool and grass', argued that 'Legislation should be introduced to

104 L.J. Dunn, The Rabbit Industry - An Economic Survey 1904-1947, University of Tasmania, Department of Economics and Commerce, 1948. (Duplicated typed copy ANL), Appendices.

105 CPD, 1918; 83, 3018; 84, 3339.

106 ANUA, E256/109/6766, Graziers' Association, Fourth Annual Conference.

prevent the landholder or any member of his family hunting, skinning or in any way making a profit from the sale of rabbits'.¹⁰⁷ A rather confused letter from Lloyds Freezing Company, Tenterfield, asking for reserved freezer space, summed up the conflict of interest among farmers:

You may not be aware that this company embraces many of the most prominent men of the Tenterfield District to which the Rabbit as a pest is of much more importance than the same as foodstuff, still there are other Members whose funds are invested and to whom the matter is of much importance. ¹⁰⁸

The writer meant to claim that the freezer works served the interests of those who wanted to rid their properties of rabbits as well as those who wanted to make money from rabbits, but most rural organizations considered the two interests were incompatible. Those making money from dealing in rabbits were by no means all Labor supporters.

As I said in the introduction we tend to use language as though words had immutably fixed meanings but, in practice, changing social and emotional circumstances can lead to major shifts in interpretation. Lacking a feudal tradition Australia could not utilize the British definition of vermin; instead a vague economic criterion was developed. James Mathews, member for Melbourne Ports

107 Ibid., E256/133/8348. W. Moylan, Barraba, 11 November 1922.

108 A.A., CRS A2 1918/2127.

grasped this fact but drew the wrong implications:

If rabbits had the same commercial value as sheep they would not be regarded as a pest ... A pest ceases to be a pest when it is found to possess a commercial value. If there is a commercial value in anything in the vegetable world it is very quickly eradicated unless people take steps to perpetuate it instead of killing it right off. The discovery of commercial value in the prickly pear would be of immense benefit to the agriculturists and pastoralists of Australia. 109

The fallacy in his reasoning lay in the assumption that all economic interests can be truly and impartially weighted and that a group's political muscle grows in direct proportion to its economic value. Sometimes a small, vocal business group can exert great pressure. Luckily for the farmers of Queensland and New South Wales there was no market for cactus spines and no-one found a way of profitably utilizing cactus flesh. If they had then there would undoubtedly have been opposition to the introduction of a cactus predator which would not recognize boundary fences.

Despite the scepticism of scientists and politicians many farmers retained their faith in the possibilities of a devastating rabbit disease, but even the Country Party was not a believer in its imminent discovery. The Graziers' Association carried on a long correspondence with Earle Page in his capacity as leader of the Country Party over the possibility of conducting large scale field

tests with the so-called Yalgogrin disease, or indeed any likely disease, but they were informed any such move would have to come from the states.¹¹⁰ The 1921 annual conference of the Graziers' Association had forwarded resolutions to the state Ministry of Public Health and Motherhood asking that an invitation be sent to the French Pasteur Institute to establish a branch in Australia and that the state and the commonwealth should co-operate in scientific investigations into rabbit eradication.¹¹¹ The communication was eventually passed on to the Institute. Knibbs replied that any such research establishment would be part of the Institute or a proposed Bureau of Science, but that there were no funds for action in the foreseeable future.¹¹² In a direct reply to the minister about rabbit disease research he pointed out that his vote made no provision for it and that 'there does not appear to be any likelihood of an early solution to the problem being reached and investigational work would be costly'.¹¹³

It is against this background that the 1923 Advances to Settlers Act has to be considered. This act provided the states with funds at reduced interest to enable them to make more loans to farmers for rabbit-proof netted fences.¹¹⁴ It was a most unexpected piece of legislation.

110 ANUA, E256/139/9166, Graziers' Association, 1923.

111 Ibid., E256/110/6853, 28 July 1921. This was yet another example of the tendency to favour the foreign expert over the local man.

112 Ibid., E256/128/8214, 3 October 1922.

113 A.A., CRS A458 F384/2, 1921. Prime Minister's Dept.

114 Advances to Settlers Act, (1923, No. 19).

In 1922 there was a petition from the Mudgee Pastures Protection Board, endorsed by most of the boards, asking that the commonwealth set up a £3 million fund to finance cheap fencing against rabbits. The government replied that the proper agency to approach was the State Lands Department, 'which is in close touch with settlers and both economically and practically in a better position than the commonwealth to carry out the proposal submitted'.¹¹⁵

In 1922 a meeting of farmers at Delungra asked the New South Wales Government to set up a £5 million fund for the same purpose and the annual conference of the Graziers' Association adopted the resolution.¹¹⁶ However, the Lands Department replied that 'sufficient funds are available for the purchase of netting and no difficulty is experienced in obtaining netting as required'.¹¹⁷ Early in 1923 Bruce answered a similar question in parliament by simply saying that fencing was a state matter.¹¹⁸ By the middle of the same year he had reversed his stand and introduced the Advances to Settlers Act.

Concern over rabbits was a familiar topic in federal parliament. Country members frequently raised it

115 A.A., CRS A 458F384/2

116 ANUA, E256/126/8035, 21 August 1922.

117 Ibid., E256/139/9107, 2 August 1923.

118 CPD, 1923, 102, 311.

in debates over rural hardships. Rural disaffection had also been building up over the National Government's war-time rabbit policies. The Graziers' Association recorded numerous protests over the embargo on the export of rabbit skins, and war-time shortages of wire netting and poison had exacerbated the chronic rabbit problem.¹¹⁹ There had also been many requests to lift the tariff on imported wire netting. Hughes complied but replaced it with a dumping duty which aroused equal hostility.¹²⁰

Why did Bruce reverse his position and introduce a bill to provide fencing assistance at the end of 1923? The gag was much used to get it through in just over a week as irate members kept saying Bruce was in a hurry to leave the country to attend the Imperial Conference; the state governments had not complained of inadequate funds for the purpose; constitutionally Bruce had admitted fencing was a state responsibility, and in the one area that was the undisputed prerogative of the federal government, tariff protection, the commonwealth refused to act to reduce costs.

According to some Labor men Bruce saw the chance to direct a small budget surplus where it would do most

119 ANUA, E256/85/5002; CPD, 1920, 91, 279.

120 ANUA, E256/122/7654, 9 June 1922; E256/142/9358, 2 October 1923.

electoral good.¹²¹ Next year there might be too many other calls on such a sum, which was, conveniently, about the same as the profit the federal government had made from the rabbit fur monopoly. Whereas the profit from the control of wheat sacks had been returned to the wheat growers' association, the government had declined to try to return the rabbit skin profit to the trappers.¹²² As the new Country Party vote had risen from 9.26% in 1919 to 12.56% in 1922, and many of the more radical farmers were not happy with a coalition government, it is reasonable to assume Bruce was aware of the advisability of appearing sensitive to rural problems.¹²³ A South Australian Labor member, Joel Gabb, speculated along similar lines:

I wonder whether there is a political reason behind the introduction of the bill. Is it merely a sop to the Country Party? ... a quid pro quo for the reduction in postage rates which will favour the big city merchants. 124

The official reason was the need to aid small settlers and there was ample evidence that their hardships were genuine.¹²⁵ Fencing was acknowledged to be one of

121 CPD, 1923, 105, Joel Gabb, 2631; Matthew Charlton, 2681; Hubert Lazzarini, 2686.

122 CPD, 1919, 84, 3508; 1919; 88, 10551.

123 PR, 1923, Vol. 33, p. 103.

124 CPD, 1923, 105, 2631.

125 Ibid., 2843.

the heaviest costs a farmer had to bear, and wire-netting fences were regarded as the most important step to protect a property against rabbits. The difficulties experienced by soldier settlers were a political embarrassment, but although the government said that the bill was designed to help the needy, no such qualifications were specifically included. It was left to the discretion of the states to deal with all applications and, as Labor men pointed out, there was no reason Sir Sydney Kidman himself, who was probably the largest landholder in Australia, could not receive assistance. Interestingly, at the time the bill was being debated there was considerable rural speculation about the imposition of a dumping duty on imported British wire netting.¹²⁶ Early in 1924 one was imposed, despite widespread opposition from farmers.¹²⁷ It would be inaccurate to assert that the government was giving with one hand in order to take away with the other, because imported wire accounted for only a fraction of the amount used in Australia; but Bruce knew that his tariff policies were unpopular with the rural electorate. Soon after he took office in February 1923 the Pastoral Review noted with disapproval that the Prime Minister had gone out of his way to deny rumours that he intended to tear up the tariffs, and farmers were sure that the interests of the wire

126 PR, 1923, Vol. 33, p. 211.

127 ANUA, E256/153/9635; E256/122/7654.

industry and John Lysaght were close to the government's heart.¹²⁸ In all, 1923 was an expedient time for the government to make an obvious and identifiable contribution to the war on rabbits. It might take decades before research funds invested in the Institute made valuable returns: money invested in fencing loans would be making visible returns before the next elections.

The Advances to Settlers bill was a very sketchy piece of legislation. It had seven brief clauses and no administrative detail. Up to £250,000 was to be placed in a trust fund to buy netting which the government would allot to the states for distribution. Committees would be set up in each state to administer the allocation and repayments would be long term, and according to Austin Chapman, Minister for Trade and Customs, who introduced the legislation, 'practically interest free'.¹²⁹ The basic Labor objections were presented by the Leader of the Opposition, Charlton. He approved the principle but condemned the failure of the government to explain how recipients were to be selected, how the money would be divided, how much the states would be allowed to charge for administration, how the states could ensure that they were not left with massive debts, and how much of the wire would be locally manufactured.¹³⁰ All these points were to be determined

128 PR, 1923, Vol. 33, p. 103; CPD, 1927; 996. By 1927 £466,000 in bounties had been paid to the two Australian wire factories.

129 CPD, 1923, 105, 2612.

130 Ibid., 2613ff.

by regulation or, in the case of the purchase of wire, of the discretion of the Minister. As another Labor man put it, the bill was 'a moderate but not a well considered measure of state socialism'.¹³¹ It actually went rather too far for at least one Labor member. Albert Green of Kalgoorlie denounced it as 'something more than socialism and I cannot agree to go so far as this measure. I am not a communist ... This is a proposal to lend money without interest'.¹³² Naturally this kind of socialism did not alarm Country Party members like the industrial variety, and Robert Cook, the member for Indi declared, 'If the proposal is a socialistic one it is socialism of the right sort'.¹³³

However, within Bruce's own party there was some disquiet over the bill both for interference with states' rights, particularly through the formation of special committees and, more importantly, for interference with private enterprise, through the bulk purchase of netting. Two very influential members expressed their anxiety in the House. John Latham, who became Attorney-General in 1925 said the bill was unconstitutional and argued that the government could only make cash grants, not provide netting to the states, and Groom, the Attorney-General, reluctantly agreed that there might be a problem.¹³⁴

131 Ibid., 2623.

132 Ibid., 2638.

133 Ibid., 2632.

134 Ibid., 2634; 2689.

At the end of the brief time allowed for the second reading in the House, Groom submitted an amendment changing the character of the bill. Instead of the commonwealth advancing wire netting to the states it would advance the money and let the states make their own purchases.¹³⁵ The change removed the financial advantage that would have flowed from the single bulk purchase. It had been forced on the government by a revolt of its own supporters.¹³⁶

The extreme Labor position was epitomized by Dr Maloney, who argued that rabbits were a source of food and employment and a cause of land redistribution,¹³⁷ and by Senator Albert Gardiner, who saw the grasping fist of Kidman behind the proposal. He was only 56 and lived to be 85, but he announced 'I am not youthful or active enough to take on the task of worrying Ministers to secure a share of these doles for my constituents and I want to kill this pernicious system in its infancy'.¹³⁸ One South Australia Nationalist, Richard Foster, who held the rural seat of Wakefield, admitted to the House that he was distressed at the failure of the government to inform its own supporters how the scheme would work, but he thought that it would be

135 Ibid., 2692.

136 Ibid., 3216.

137 See p.337.

138 Ibid., 3203.

a brave man who dared go back to his country electorate having voted against a measure to give money to farmers.¹³⁹ The debates were poorly attended as well as rushed. For much of the time there were only 19 Labor men, one Country Party man and six Nationalists present in the House of Representatives.¹⁴⁰

The state governments did not greet the act with enthusiasm either. Eight months later only Western Australia had submitted claims. Netting seemed to bring out the worst in New South Wales' dealings with the commonwealth. In 1907 the two governments had nearly come to blows over the forcible removal of wire netting from bond stores. The federal government wrote to New South Wales that the Collector had been instructed 'to maintain possession of the goods at all hazards and to call the necessary assistance'.¹⁴¹ In 1923 the exchanges were more restrained. New South Wales was offered £62,000 but said that soldier settlers alone would take £70,000 in three months, and as there was £82,000 remaining in their own fencing fund, to be lent at 5% p.a. there was little pressure to join the scheme.¹⁴² After protracted

139 Ibid., 2688.

140 CPD, 1923, 105, 2637, 2686.

141 A.A., CRS A2 3808/1907.

142 D. Stead, Rabbit Menace Inquiry, pp. 104, 112.

negotiations a settlement was reached. Applications were restricted to soldier settlers, to avoid too much competition with the state scheme, which was 1% p.a. more expensive, and although the commonwealth had said that it wanted the wire to go to the most needy, the state insisted on mortgage security and administered the Act through the pastures protection boards. The boards in this instance screened rigorously, to avoid being saddled with debts. After twelve months only nine applications had been approved.¹⁴³

It was not that New South Wales was indifferent to the demand for fencing. From 1905 to 1923 the state had voted £430,000 for fencing loans at 5% to 6% interest.¹⁴⁴ Admittedly £200,000 for that was voted in 1922-23, when the Nationalists replaced Labor and when the federal scheme had been announced, but there had been little point in establishing large funds before the end of the war-time shortages of wire. Seeing that the state had never requested this form of aid and that it was prepared to act, if pushed hard enough, there were grounds for resenting commonwealth involvement, particularly when the latter's disregard for repayment guarantees is remembered. The act implied that the states would be responsible for defaulters because the money was loaned to them, not to individual farmers.

143 CPD, 1924, 109, 5276.

144 Stead, p. 104; state policy is discussed in Chapter 9.

The Victorian reaction was similar, if a little less overtly hostile. Victoria was deeply involved in settling the Mallee and Wimmera. These farmers fitted the vague federal criterion of 'needy settlers', and both the state and commonwealth systems were administered by the Closer Settlement Board. However, of the £40,000 voted for Victoria only £1,300 had been taken up by December 1924.¹⁴⁵ By mid-1925 £123,576 had been advanced to all states, excluding South Australia, which never joined. Victoria had taken up nearly one-third of its advance and New South Wales somewhat less.¹⁴⁶ In 1925 £500,000 was placed on the estimates for further advances but in 1926 negotiations were still taking place over regulations to govern its handling. Following a letter from the New South Wales government threatening to pull out, the commonwealth yielded to widespread state demands and revised the act.¹⁴⁷ Three million pounds were to be provided to the states over six years at 1% less than the market borrowing rate of 5%. The states could then charge settlers up to 1% more (5%), plus £1 per mile, to cover costs and defaulters. Selection and security were left to the states. In other words, the commonwealth was simply adding to existing state funds. The scheme still

145 VPD, 1925, 111, 2274.

146 CPD, 1925, 111, 2274.

147 CPD, 1926, 113, 2620; 114, 4457; A.A., CRS A2718/XM, Bruce Page Cabinet Minutes, 19 October 1926.

did not appeal to most Premiers. Although the amended act was passed in 1927 and backdated to July 1926, only two states, Queensland and Western Australia ever took advantage of it.¹⁴⁸

The Advances to Settlers Act was not a move towards the development of a commonwealth policy on vermin control. Although fencing was the recognized first step in the fight against the rabbit, a judgment only superseded by the advent of myxomatosis, 1080 poison and the prohibitive cost of such fencing today, it needs more than wire netting and good intentions to make a fence vermin proof. Netting had to be buried, stays had to be properly aligned inside the fences, undergrowth cleared away from the wire and, above all, gates had to be made secure. The New South Wales Rabbit Menace Inquiry, 1925-26, presented a scathing indictment of the standard of vermin proof fencing in that state. Inspection, where it occurred, was the responsibility of the pastures protection boards, neighbours policing neighbours. In Victoria inspection may have been more rigorous, because the Closer Settlement Boards were more impersonally inquisitive about what was happening on the farms under their jurisdiction, but this is only speculation. The key point is that the commonwealth was simply providing loan facilities, not new initiatives or even more

148 CPD, 1932, 135, 216.

rigorous application of known counter-measures.

Fencing was at best a palliative, not a cure. Fires, floods, sand and natural decay meant that fences had to be maintained and replaced. Because the loans had to be repaid the commonwealth was not ultimately up for a large outlay, even when it took over responsibility for final repayments during the depression. The figures for defaulters in 1938, the end of the era of hardship, show that the federal government had written off a total of just over £6,000.¹⁴⁹

The states had begun large loan programmes long before the commonwealth became involved. Some dated back to the 1880s. Although some rural groups had demanded additional federal funds, security rather than the availability of money had been the limiting factor, and it remained so. Most of the federal fund was never taken up because of the depression. State governments had concentrated their requests for aid on cheaper wire and

149 A.A., CRS A609 90/60/1. Department of Commerce and Agriculture, Correspondence files, Multi-number series.

	VIC	N.S.W.	TOTAL
Advances	£59,948	£51,154	£248,444
Repayments	22,201	27,659	137,539
Written off	5,673	NIL	6,229
<u>Arrears as of June 1931</u>			
Victoria	£7,384	(mainly in the Mallee)	
N.S.W.	4,988		
Tasmania	31		

federal funding for intensive research. Neither proposition was popular with the federal government. Returns on scientific research could not be backed with first mortgages and the rabbit industry lobby was influential. The main virtues of the Advances to Settlers Act were that it took some of the heat out of the dumping bounty issue, and thus out of the tariff question as a whole, that it was a visible sign of federal concern, that it was electorally popular and that it freed the government from all administrative and debt collecting responsibilities. Amid debates over its constitutional correctness or socialistic tendencies few questioned the idea behind this approach to the vermin problem. Despite its faults in drafting and after 1926 the participation of only two states and the Northern Territory, the act survived a number of revisions until it was finally made redundant by myxomatosis and inflation.

The commonwealth chose to become involved in the provision of rabbit-proof fencing loans, despite the objections of the state leaders: it had no choice about involvement in the matter of rabbit fur farming. However, this time it proved more responsive to the wishes of the states. In 1926 Cabinet discussed a request to permit the introduction of long-haired rabbits for breeding purposes. On the recommendation of the Minister for Defence the application was rejected, 'in view of the losses due to

the rabbit pest in Australia and to the stringent legislation in force in all states on the keeping of rabbits'.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, in New South Wales and in South Australia there was strong support for the project from a section of small farmers and businessmen, so the topic was again raised. New South Wales conducted an inquiry in 1928-29. The majority report, signed by the primary producers' representatives on the committee, opposed the importation of angora and chinchilla rabbits, but the minority report, written by public servants, favoured it.¹⁵¹ The Department of Agriculture endorsed the minority report and in 1929 the Premier's Department approved importation of specialty rabbits, under strict supervision and control.¹⁵² Although any state could permit rabbit farming, the introduction of breeding stock needed federal permission, so Cabinet was again consulted. It concluded this time that 'there does not seem to be any valid reason why the industry should not be encouraged, and the importation of animals for this purpose under proper safeguards permitted'.¹⁵³ A submission was prepared for the Premiers' Conference and, within the year, the incoming Labor government lifted the quarantine

150 Ibid., A2718/XM, 9 February 1926. Bruce Page Cabinet Minutes.

151 Fur Farming in N.S.W., unpublished Committee Investigation, State Library of N.S.W., 8/2018.

152 Ibid., 8/2018, 10 June 1929, Premier's Department.

153 A.A., CRS A2718/XM, 26 April 1929.

prohibition.¹⁵⁴

Whereas the fencing loans had been intended to appeal to the rural organizations, regardless of state government opinion, the fur farming decision was resented by farmers' organizations but pleased the governments and some groups of farmers.¹⁵⁵ Later experience has validated the opinion of experts that any escape of the delicate, large, fine furred, hatched-reared rabbits would not lead to a plague of 'super rabbits'. However, federal leaders did not address themselves to one of the other main points of the majority report, which was that rabbit farming would have a bad moral effect on landholders, 'who require persistent keeping up to their obligations to free the land of rabbits'.¹⁵⁶ Supporters' expectations of fur farming profits were wildly exaggerated and when the world depression came, the bottom fell out of the luxury wool cloth trade and most of the ventures failed. The decision to allow the importation of rabbits is, in itself, insignificant but it does illustrate the ad hoc nature of the commonwealth approach to legislation on pests and, despite the strident note sounded by a few Labor members, the lack of distinctive party positions.

Although the quarantine regulations were relaxed

154 Government Gazette, 21 November 1929.

155 ANUA, E256/232/MM38. Graziers' Association.

156 Fur Farming Committee, Majority report, Appendix A.

by a Labor government, traditionally more receptive to the interests of small farmers and rural workers than to the fears of graziers, the initial moves had begun under the Bruce-Page Ministry. Just as concern for export earnings and a healthy economy had led some men to see the need for a national scientific research organization, so the prospect of a new, labour intensive industry dominated thinking in this minor field, to the exclusion of any debate about the environmental implications of increased commercialization of rabbits.¹⁵⁷

It is tempting but futile to speculate what the results would have been if the money earmarked for the Advances to Settlers Act had been devoted to pest control work under the Insitute or under CSIR. Such a move would have meant the permanent investment of capital, not the setting up of a recouperable loan. The kind of long term economic considerations that directed attention to the need for centralized, scientific research into primary industries were not sufficiently acute to cause immediate action. Because of the nature of the constitution, problems touching primary industry tended to exercise a direct effect on state, not federal legislation. For the commonwealth there was what might be called a double institutional barrier to any sensitive appreciation of the problems associated with vermin and weed control. Direct contact with farmers was

157 This aspect has been discussed in another part of the thesis in relation to the influence of Section 92 of the Constitution on state policy. See Chapter 9.

through state officials and any legislation dealing with rural industries had to meet with state approval, even if it was constitutionally acceptable, or counter the kind of treatment meted out by most states to the Advances to Settlers Act. On the other hand, the areas in which the commonwealth was free to act without constitutional restraints, such as tariff reform, were not, on the whole, politically appealing. There was good co-operation between federal and state authorities over prickly pear research, but there was no commercial factor to complicate the picture and the Prickly Pear Board only cost the commonwealth £4,000 p.a. The commonwealth government was more isolated from the immediate environmental issue and thus even more subject to extraneous political pressures when legislation was proposed than were the states. The constitution was not an inevitable barrier to the development of an integrated policy but its restraints provided the excuse for failure to decide between conflicting interest groups and a reason for not spending large sums where a return was not assured. It also isolated politicians from the urgency of the situation.

CHAPTER 11

Conclusion

The development of vermin and weed policy from the first acts against the rabbits, until the depression of the 1930s disrupted most programmes, is almost a study in paradoxes. On the one hand the subordination of pest control measures to the dictates of land tenure policy created problems for Victoria and particularly for New South Wales. On the other hand, the desire to encourage viable intensification of settlement was one of the main reasons why governments were forced to continue trying to find effective, acceptable solutions. The commonwealth was not subject to the same direct pressure, despite the general economic factors which eventually made it impossible to completely ignore the issue, therefore successive governments were much freer than their state counterparts to avoid the really difficult and expensive problems. However, this in turn meant that the sense of overriding need was missing from most federal debates, and party politics and internal party disagreements assumed considerable importance.

Over the 50 year period attitudes underwent many changes, but paradoxes abound here as well. It took much longer for settlers to appreciate the seriousness of the rabbit problem than it took for that awareness to become blunted by over-familiarity. While landholders continued to bemoan the rabbit menace, a certain fatalistic acceptance

rapidly developed. Perceptions of what was actually happening to the land were obscured by the scale of the problem. It was too big, too difficult and it dragged on for too long. The same comment is applicable to the weed problem. Whereas the individual landholder could successfully smite his dingoes and unfortunate wombats with a heavy hand, rabbits, like weeds, seemed to flourish anew every spring. Therefore it was more satisfying to put money and energy into the much lesser vermin problem of native animals. The authorities and the majority of settlers were not blind to the relative economic importance of different kinds of vermin, and they were not unaware of a relationship between dingo eradication and the growth in marsupial numbers, or between bird destruction and insect plagues, but although these environmental perceptions existed, they ran counter to strong emotional attitudes that constituted a far more powerful impetus to action.

The traditional European image of the rabbit proved almost as hard to eradicate as the animal itself. This is shown not only by the speed with which the rabbit plagues have been largely forgotten and the casual attitude of many modern farmers towards dealing with the survivors of myxomatosis, but also by the willingness of many small farmers in the 1920s to consider the possibility of rabbit fur farming. Obviously the word 'rabbit' did not produce feelings of lasting revulsion or anxiety. The commercial utilization of the rabbit was one reason for the ambivalent attitude. At an intellectual level there was little rural

disagreement with the proposition that rabbits were a curse. However, this did not mean that rabbits were not the main source of meat for many families or that the money from skins and carcasses was not a welcome sight to innumerable cash starved selectors.

The more people became accustomed to living with rabbit infestation the more sensitive they became to the nuances of policies designed to get rid of the pest. Although most remained advocates of more effective legislation, when legislation was proposed it was often seen in terms of more taxation, more interfering inspectors or a reduced chance of acquiring more land, and therefore it was not readily acceptable. These other issues retained the capacity to arouse a greater degree of emotional commitment than the ever present rabbit problem. Conversely, familiarity with a particular form of control method could eventually lead to it gaining a high degree of acceptance. This was the case with the simultaneous killing programmes arranged and enforced by the Victorian Lands Department. There had been arguments against such programmes in the 1880s but by the early twentieth century they were one of the measures for which the department was most praised. New South Wales settlers approved the principle but found so many objections to organizing the practice that it did not become a feature of their policy.

Probably because it had such deep roots in the

intellectual tradition of nineteenth century English speaking people, faith in science remained a consistent strand in popular attitudes to vermin and weed control. Nevertheless, it never achieved the same hold on public opinion in Victoria that it did in New South Wales, despite the similarities of background. Once again there was a gulf between attitude and action. In one way later Australian pest control policy has been haunted by two fortuitous discoveries: cactoblastis and myxomatosis. With the aid of these, two most serious introduced pests were eventually countered without recourse to extremely expensive innovations or major interference with individual property management. This reinforced the stubborn myth that there is always a cheap, 'natural solution', if only vested interests or government stupidity do not prevent its introduction. However, cactoblastis did not demolish the cactus until the end of the 1920s and myxomatosis was not successfully introduced until 1950. The strength of the attitudes produced by these events should not be read back into pre-1926 Victorian opinion, and although New South Wales rural opinion was always receptive to the claims of scientists and other experimenters, this was one area where governments tended to listen to their own experts and to exercise considerable caution. They were influenced by fears of the possible adverse consequences and the probability of the high cost of experiments; in Victoria attitudes were modified by the existence of alternative policies and the lack of strongly motivated, wealthy pressure groups.

Attitudes and actions create a delicate interplay. Not only does changing experience modify attitudes but the process also works the other way, and sometimes the channels through which attitudes can be transformed into actions are disrupted. Despite the common heritage of their settlers and the initial similarity of their attitudes and responses to rabbits and noxious weeds, in New South Wales and Victoria policies took different courses. This was largely a result of the different stages reached in their land use policies and the social tension and economic problems this caused in New South Wales, but the particular directions adopted were markedly influenced by administrative factors.

Both governments initially opted for decentralized, locally controlled programmes, although only Victoria had a system of compulsory shire organization and New South Wales had to work through the narrowly sectional pastures and stock protection boards. It therefore seems contradictory that Victoria was pushed into an increasingly centralized scheme and New South Wales had to abandon the 1883 attempt to centralize its rabbit control policy. However, the original 1883 Rabbit Nuisance Act was tried for less than one year before it was turned into a straight bounty system. There were too few inspectors, too much paper work, too little support from landholders, and soon, too much resumed land for the administrative framework to cope with the original plan. From then on New South Wales governments were faced with the problem of selecting or creating an acceptable form of local administration and the whole matter became

deeply entangled with rural interest groups and ultimately with party politics.

In Victoria the shires were composed of so many interest groups and were so wide ranging in their authority that they were soon only too willing to opt out of such a difficult matter as rabbit control, leaving little alternative to central administration. From then on it was a reluctant step by step progression to an intergrated, centralized system. The longer New South Wales delayed making decisive moves the more difficult they became. Various groups developed their own ways of coping and conflicts of interest intensified.

There is no simple model that explains where the spurs to action originated. In the early 1880s the New South Wales government seemed to be ahead of public opinion, whereas the government of Victoria, the first state to feel the brunt of the rabbit advance, lagged behind. In the 1890s New South Wales governments were clearly reluctant to tackle the difficulties of vermin and weed control and concentrated on a barrier fence policy of questionable worth but high visibility. However neither state could ignore the growing menace of vermin and weeds without sacrificing basic principles of land utilization. Even the commonwealth behind its constitutional shield was reluctantly drawn in. Yet within all three spheres central bureaucratic structures themselves modified the intentions

of policy makers. The jealousies of the departments that shared authority for various aspects of policy administration, their slowness to develop research branches and the importance of the attitude of the permanent senior public servants, such as Francis Allan, were all factors to be reckoned with.

The states eventually arrived at different solutions to the problems of vermin and pest control for reasons that owed little to their original intentions or attitudes.

APPENDIX

OFFICIAL MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION
INTO SCHEMES FOR THE EXTERMINATION OF RABBITSNEW SOUTH WALES

MacLaurin, Henry M.D., 1835-1914. Physician and public man. Sat on a number of investigatory committees; eventually became Chancellor of Sydney University. (Mackerras, C.B. 'Sir Henry Normand MacLaurin', J.R.A.H.S., 1968, pp. 265-8).

Wilkinson, William Camac M.D., 1856-1946, physician, educated at Sydney University and University of London. 1885-89 Alderman of Sydney. 1888 President pathology section Intercolonial Medical Conference. Did much acclaimed work of tuberculosis in the colony and later in England. (ADB files).

Quin, Edward. MLA for Wentworth. Owner of Tarella Station, Deniliquin. One of the most active politicians on the rabbit question.

VICTORIA

Allen, Harry Brookes M.D., 1854-1926. Professor of Pathology and Anatomy Melbourne University 1882. President Royal Commission on the Sanitary State of Melbourne 1888. President Australian Medical

Congress 1909. Visited Europe 1890 and obtained recognition of Melbourne medical degrees.

According to the British Medical Journal 2 March 1935 he was a 'brilliant pathologist'.

Lacelles, Edward Harewood, 1847-1917. Pastoralist and businessman. In the 1870s he became involved in the Mallee area and experimented successfully with dry farming and rabbit eradication. Active encourager of sharefarming. Had the reputation of being a good man to work for. (ADB, V, pp. 66-7.)

Pearson, Alfred F.R. Met. Soc.; F.C.S.; A.L.C.
1856-? Chemist and agriculturalist.
(ADB files).

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Stirling, Edward Charles M.D. 1848-1919. Surgeon, scientist and politician. First Professor Physiology University of Adelaide, Member University Council. Considerable exploration in search of specimens for the S.A. Museum, his life's work. Very active public career. F.R.S. London 1893.

Paterson, Alexander Stuart, M.D.
Colonial Surgeon for S.A. from 1870.

QUEENSLAND

Bancroft, Joseph, M.D. 1836-1904. Won many prizes Manchester Royal School of Medicine. Keen naturalist. Kept contact with eminent European and British scientists. Keenly interested in problems affecting stock and agriculture and conducted many practical experiments. Foundation member Royal Society of Queensland. Member of the Medical Board of Queensland 1876-94. Between 1866-1894 published 38 scientific papers, many of international note. (ADB, 3, 84).

TASMANIA

Tabart, Thomas. Chief inspector of Vermin. Had conducted experiments into the incidence of tuberculosis among rabbits.

NEW ZEALAND

Alfred Bell.

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Department of Commerce and Agriculture - particularly CA 48, CRS A 609, on the advances for wire netting purchases.

Department of Markets and Migration.

Premiers Department - particularly A2 on dealing with the states and Britain over the war-time rabbit trade.

Department of Trade and Customs - particularly CA 10, CRS A 597 correspondence files from 1915.

b. Australian National University Archives of Business and Labour

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Australian Estates Company (selected properties).

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(selected properties).

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also Rabbit and Noxious Weed Legislation file 1897.

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record books E 256/126/-.

J.A. Gunn Papers and Newspaper Cutting Books.

c. Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization Archives

Minutes of the Advisory Council 1916-1921.

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Dennys Lascelles (Lascelles Conron Correspondence 1895-1906. Tyrrell Downs to J. Turriff, Hopetoun).

J. McLeod Jr. Letter Books, Northern Vermin Board Inspector, 1891-1911, BURR I.

John Hunter Patterson Collection, Private Correspondence.

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